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—*The Hindu*

ISMAT CHUGHTAI

Translated from the original Urdu by Tahira Naqvi

One Drop of Blood

THE STORY OF KARBALA



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—Husain Ibn Ali

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ONE DROP OF BLOOD

The Story of Karbala
a novel

Ismat Chughtai

*Translated from the original Urdu
by Tahira Naqvi*



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Foreword

In 1972, at the age of 61, Ismat Chughtai wrote *Ek Qatra-e-Khoon* (One Drop of Blood), her last novel, 357 pages long and her final literary work; it was based, in her own words, on the *marsiyas* or elegies, of Mir Anis, one of the greatest *marsiya* writers of the nineteenth century (1802-1874). Ismat's subject is the 680 AD battle fought in Karbala, in present-day Iraq, in which the small army of Imam Husain, the grandson of Prophet Muhammad, clashes with the mighty forces of Yazid, the reigning Caliph. In her Preface to the novel, Ismat wrote:

This is the story of those seventy-two people who took a stand against imperialism in order to defend human rights—

This fourteen-hundred-year-old story is today's story as well, because man is still man's greatest enemy—

For today, too, the standard-bearer of humanity is man—

Today, too, when a Yazid raises his head in some part of the world, Husain steps forward and crushes him—

Even today, light wins against darkness.

Ismat was not Shia, nor was she religious, and none of her earlier works prepare us for this shift in subject matter and style. An undaunted and utterly unselfconscious feminist at a time when the term had not yet been coined, she wrote fearlessly and without mincing words, about women, young and old, rich and poor, their sexual angst, their emotional longings and desires, their exploitation by the society of which they were a part. She gained notoriety—a fact that she confessed she regretted immensely—when her controversial *Lihaaf* (The Quilt) was published. The story about a young married woman's sexual

relationship with her maidservant, created a commotion in literary and social circles. Ismat was charged with obscenity by the British, a long-drawn-out trial ensued, and the case was finally dropped due to the absence of obscene words in the text. Ismat, along with Saadat Hasan Manto, who had been similarly charged for his story *Buu* (Odour), sat and shelled peanuts outside the Lahore court as the trial proceeded, popped them into their mouths, and laughed at the silliness of their accusers. However, the notoriety earned by *Lihaaf* persisted, and the story has now become the marker by which Ismat is instantly recognised. In an interview, she admitted her disappointment with the way in which *Lihaaf* docketed her, placed her within a narrow context, a factor that would indeed also distress any serious student of her work. She cursed the fame she had achieved with *Lihaaf*, *Terhi Lakir* (The Crooked Line—a novel), and *Chotein* (Wounds—a collection of short stories), as they reduced her fame to “nothing but a pile of disrepute and abuse” and added that “if it had been someone else they would have drowned themselves in a handful of water”. In the same interview she provided some answers regarding her choice of subject matter for her last book:

Interviewer: But surely your masterful creation, *Ek Qatra-e-Khoon* made amends for all the notoriety. What motivated you to write it?

Ismat: The horror of Ali Asghar's martyrdom left a deep impression on me ever since I was a child. The tragedy behind the pageantry of Muharram commemoration forced me to think that there are so many festivals celebrated in the world, like Dussehra or Christmas, but Muharram is the only commemoration that takes place in remembrance of the cruelties inflicted upon an innocent people. I would be deeply moved whenever I heard *marsiyas* being recited. I read the *marsiyas* of Anis, attended *majlis*es with utmost earnestness, and I saw the misery of the oppressed of the world reflected in the sorrow of Husain. I found a heartbreakingly sad story. I also saw the harshness of life around me and put it in this book, and not only did I read about what Imam Husain had gone through, I also felt

it. I turned the sorrow of Husain into a guiding light and wrote *Ek Qatra-e-Khoon*.*

At the height of her literary fame, Ismat was struck by the lukewarm reaction the novel received. She tells her interviewer,

... You'll be astonished to hear that not a single publisher was willing to publish *Ek Qatra-e-Khoon*, they said it talks about religion. They said, write a sensational novel and you'll get an advance right away. Our printers are not willing to publish serious novels. Even magazines are reluctant to publish anything serious because people generally don't buy magazines containing high-quality writing..."

It is no surprise that her publishers were perturbed when she approached them with *Qatra*. They wondered, as a modern reader might, why she had chosen to end her illustrious career with a novel that bore no resemblance to her body of work, was rooted, moreover, in Islamic history, a long and complex narrative about the sacrifice of Imam Husain in Karbala, an event that is justly regarded as "the master narrative of martyrdom".† The novel contradicted her image as a secular, rebellious progressive writer, never known to be connected in any way to religious observance or belief. Why this novel now, a narrative that goes far beyond an objective, academic rendering of historical facts?

Let us remember that Ismat always challenged the publishing world, her fellow-writers, and her readers with her choice of themes and her rhetorical-stylistic approach to them. When younger, she was more preoccupied with life, family, friends and work, and ultimately was more influenced by what she discovered in the world literature she was reading and discussing. She challenged gender stereotypes and norms through her choice

* Jalil Baz Ydpuri, "A Meeting with Ismat Chughtai" in Jamil Akhtar (ed.) *Ismat Chughtai Naqad ki Kasauti Par* (New Delhi: International Urdu Foundation, 2001): 76-77.

† Syed Akbar Hyder, *Reliving Karbala: Martyrdom in South Asian Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

of subjects, such as female sexuality and the inner world of women, which was completely new in Indian writing at the time. Gradually her pen matured, her mind matured, and she settled into her own cultural heritage, aesthetics and roots. The story of Asghar that she had often heard as a child returned to haunt her, as did the *marsiyas* of Mir Anis. In addition, here's Ismat, the rebel, doing her favourite thing: rebelling. She rebels against the notion of not writing a 'novel' about Karbala. (The novelist Nasim Hijazi wrote extensively about Islamic history, but never about Karbala.) The only other work that compares with *Qatra* is Premchand's *Karbala*; Chughtai's decision to write this novel, therefore, is actually as unexpected as it is predictable.

Qatra was finally published by Fan aur Fankar, Bombay, and has been published off and on, since. The latest edition (published in 2002 by Kitabi Duniya, Delhi) changed the subtitle from "Aik novel" (a novel) to "tarikh novel" (a historical novel), and completely omitted Ismat's preface, comments, and acknowledgments included in the first published version; in the words of the critic, Sharib Radaulvi, these comments in themselves "constitute a moving story in whose short sentences are hidden the depth and layers of an ocean".* Instead, there is a long introduction to Ismat's work by author and journalist, Afzal Tauseef that includes the controversy surrounding her cremation. (Instead of being buried, Ismat was cremated, apparently in accordance with her last wishes, although that was never proven.) The last part of the introduction includes two pages about the novel itself, praising it in glowing terms and also saying:

Ismat Chughtai wrote a thousand pages of literary texts—her short stories and her novels prove that she is a great writer of this period and for time to come. But the novel *Ek Qatra-e-Khoon* takes this courageous writer to even greater heights.

* Sharib Radaulvi, "Ek qatra-e-khoon", in Jamil Akhtar (ed.) *Ismat Chughtai Naqad ki Kasauti Par* (New Delhi: International Urdu Foundation, 2001).

Qatra has never received the attention it deserves. Readers of modern fiction, especially those accustomed to Ismat's particular oeuvre, might have ignored it because of its heavy religious content. Some, misled perhaps by a superficial reading, found it wanting in terms of the verve and fervour that such a story might demand. One particular critic went so far as to call it a "damp squib"; others may have wondered about Ismat's real intent. Most bibliographies comprising her work—novels, short story anthologies, essays, reminiscences, etc.—fail to mention *Ek Qatra-e-Khoon*.

Resistance to fictionalised versions of the battle at Karbala is not new; the most famous case is that of Premchand. It is worth examining the details of that instance in order to contextualise *Qatra* and the reaction to it. In 1920, Premchand wrote the "drama" (as it is called), *Karbala*, in an effort to bridge the gap between Hindus and Muslims. He had been struck by Khwaja Hasan Nizami's* book on Krishna, and wanted to write about Islamic history in Hindi, in the way that a Muslim had written about an important and revered Hindu figure, and he had also been deeply moved by the event of Karbala. In a talk given in Chicago in 1998, C.M. Naim summarised the play and quoted from it:

Using the lore and legend of a very small Hindu community known as the Mohyals (also often called the Husaini Brahmins), he placed a group of Hindu warriors in southern Hejaz, who, upon hearing the news of Husain's opposition to the despotic rule of Yazid, rush to Karbala and die fighting on Husain's behalf. The Hindu party, led by Raja Sahas Rai, arrives at the battlefield just when Husain and

* Khwaja Hasan Nizami (1878-1955) was a Sufi of the Chishti Islamic order, a Delhi author and journalist during the Indian independence movement, who advocated the ecstatic Sufi mystic practices, as much as the demure religious laws. He supported the Islamic *tablighi*-mission and the pan-Islamic movement, while promoting, at the same time, a joint Indian nation of Hindus and Muslims (<https://www.mpib-berlin.mpg.de/en/research/history-of-emotions/projects/emotion-and-power/khwaja-hasan-nizami>).

his few remaining companions begin their obligatory afternoon prayers. The Hindus immediately take up defensive positions, and shield the praying Muslims from their enemy's arrows. After the prayers, Husain speaks:

Husain: My dear friends, who share my grief, these prayers will ever be remembered in Islam's history. We couldn't have completed them without these brave servants of God, standing behind us to protect us from the arrows of the enemy. O Worshippers of Truth, we greet you. Though you're not of the Believers (*momin*), your religion must be true and God-given if its followers are such defenders of Truth and Justice, and if they think so little of their own lives in order to support the persecuted. Such a religion will always remain in this world, and its light will spread worldwide together, with the glory of Islam.

Sahas Rai: Hazrat, we thank you for the blessings you have just cast upon us. I, too, pray to Almighty God that whenever Islam needs our blood there should be plenty of my people to bare their breasts for its cause. Please give us now your permission to go into the battlefield, and lay down our lives for the cause of Truth.

Husain: No, my friends. So long as we are alive we cannot let any guest face the battle.

Sahas Rai: Hazrat, we are not guests, we are your humble servants. To die for Truth and Justice is the fundamental principle of our life. It is our obligation and duty.

The seven brothers then go singing into the battlefield, and die fighting on Husain's behalf. Their bodies are then properly cremated on Husain's instructions.*

Premchand first wrote a story on the subject, which was published in the November issue of *Madhuri*, after which he wrote the play, which was published by Ganga Putsak Mala in Lucknow. Hindi monthlies welcomed the work, but the Urdu translation caused problems. Munshi Daya Narain Nigam, the editor of the Urdu magazine, *Zamana* (which published many of Premchand's

* C.M. Naim, "Talking about Muharram in Chicago" (http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00litlinks/naim/txt_naim_muharram.html).

articles and stories), consulted his Muslim friends, who pointed to some flaw in it. Premchand was furious at this allegation, and wrote to Nigam saying, “It’s better not to publish *Karbala*. I do not care, nor am I ready to take on this senseless headache. I read the life of Husain and developed a special regard for him. His passion for martyrdom moved me. The result was this drama. If the Muslims don’t want any of their religious leader or leader to be praised by a Hindu’s words or his pen, then I will not insist...”*

Premchand said that if they could accept *masnavis*[†] about their religious leaders, why object to a play? The main characters could not be altered, Premchand said, although it was possible to modify secondary ones. He added that Hazrat Asghar’s age had been recorded in several accounts as six, and it was these accounts that he had used in his narrative. He defended his right to take creative liberties.

Perhaps...Sahas Rai is not mentioned in ancient historical accounts, but one mention does exist in the magazine, *Mirror*, Allahabad, which I have borrowed... it’s possible that the account may not be true, but what if it has been added to embellish the story? So what? This drama is not history...[‡]

The Shia Muslim community was upset that the work was called a “drama”, which implied that it could be performed onstage, which in turn meant that the forbidden would be undertaken: presenting actors in the roles of the Prophet and his family, a sacrilegious act in the eyes of not only Shias, but of all Muslims. To this Premchand responded with ...“And, oh yes, I forgot to mention that dramas are of two kinds, one for reading and the other for the stage. This drama has been written for reading

* Madan Gopal, *Qalam Ka Mazdoor: Premchand* (New Delhi: Taraqi-e-Urdu Bureau, 1994).

[†] A form of Persian poetry; but actually Premchand was referring to the *marsiyas* of Mir Anis.

[‡] Madan Gopal, *op. cit.*

only.”* Finally, the literary assistant at *Zamana* and other friends re-examined Premchand’s text, consulted historical sources and it was decided that the drama be published in serial form.

The political consequences resulting from the tensions between Hindus and Muslims that Premchand was dealing with, and wished to counteract by undertaking this work, are important to consider; how can such notions be couched in the retelling of stories like Husain’s battle for truth and righteousness, and his martyrdom at Karbala? Ismat does something similar, an attempt, I feel, to draw the reader into the tragedy of Husain and then out again into what Gyan Prakash, in *Emergency Chronicles: Indira Gandhi and Democracy’s Turning Point* analyses “as the sudden collapse of democracy in India.”† In his Introduction, Bilal Hashmi explores this subject at length, I only state here that the text I used for my translation, a 1976 copy of *Qatra*, contained notations in the margins by a reader who read between the lines; taken together, they can be viewed as a commentary on the similarities the unknown reader saw between the “fascism” in Husain’s enemies and the death of democracy that Gyan Prakash writes about. In other words, both Premchand’s and Chughtai’s works carry a wider social, political and moral significance than is generally associated with historical novels.

As a diehard fan and translator of Ismat’s work, I find *Qatra* remarkable on many counts. In the first place, the change in subject matter and the authoritative voice and authentic tone that Ismat adopts, give one pause. We look in vain for the Ismat of *Terhi Lakir* and *Chotein*. Familiar and characteristic tropes are missing, and there is little here to betray the writer’s earlier preoccupations. In his article, “Ismat Chughtai: The Short Story Writer of Language”, Mazhar Imam says, “The world of

* Madan Gopal, *Ibid.*

† Pankaj Mishra, “A Long and Undeclared Emergency”, *The New York Review of Books*, published July 16, 2019 (<https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2019/07/18/indira-gandhi-long-undeclared-emergency/>).

Ismat is the world of poverty, illiteracy and filth. The children that are nurtured in joint families like worms and insects, the stench and reek of toilets, maidservants covered in dirt and sweat, the stifled, oppressed young girl peering through the curtains, the one who gives birth to illegitimate children from behind that curtain—these are Ismat's familiar scenes.”* A change has occurred; there is none of this in her last work.

Soon after its publication, Ismat touched upon this topic in response to an interviewer's question and explained her motivation for delving into the events at Karbala; she explained how this new project impelled her to remodel her style to suit the ethos of the topic and how satisfying it had been:

Noor-ul-ain Ali: Apa, I want to ask you, the characteristic style you have—did you use it in this novel, or because of the serious subject and (the character of) a religious personage, you've made changes in it?

Ismat Chughtai: I've tried to (pauses)...steal Anis's style and I've changed my style completely. I've made an effort to keep even a single sentence of mine out. I've not written anything from imagination, I've taken everything from books.

Noor-ul-ain Ali: That was good (with a smile), or else... You know, Maulvi Nazir Ahmed maintained his characteristic style in *Amhat Allama* and in his desire to use his special metaphorical language, he raised a storm.

Ismat Chughtai: (laughing) No. I've tried to change my writing and I had a great deal of fun treading a new path. I can't tell you how gripping this novel has been, and so fulfilling.[†]

Indeed, in *Qatra*, Ismat has very diligently and painstakingly crafted a distinctive style, new to her as a writer, a very different

* Yunus Agaskar, “A Conversation with Ismat Chughtai”, in Jamil Akhtar (ed.) *Ismat Chughtai Naqad ki Kasauti Par* (New Delhi: International Urdu Foundation, 2001): 336-338.

† Yunus Agaskar, *ibid*: 73-75.

literary approach to tackling a difficult subject. Her language is neither Begumati nor everyday colloquial, or even *bambayya*; it moves into a more elevated range, resonating with Perso-Arabic linguistic construction, closer to the complex literary style of Mir Anis, replete with honorifics, titles, and designations characteristic of a narrative about the Prophet and his family. The metaphors and symbols derive extensively from the desert, from water which was a rare commodity; the River Furat or Euphrates from which Husain and his family were barred on the seventh of Muharram; the relentless, fiery sun and cloudless sky during the day, the dark and unlit night sky; the barrenness and scant vegetation; the fierce desert storms.

As one reads, it becomes clear that Ismat has studied the *marsiyas* carefully and closely, would have taken notes, made lists, perhaps looked at maps, scrutinised each event and its corresponding characters with the utmost attention. In saying she based her novel on the *marsiyas* one might surmise that this was an easy and simple exercise. But that would not have been the case. The *marsiyas* are not placed in sequence and are dispersed over four volumes. Ismat would have read each *marsiya*, selected those that provided a linear progression for her narrative, choosing the ones she liked and found effective, because there are several *marsiyas* for each event, in each volume. Also, she is not simply paraphrasing Anis. Her novel is clearly a novel, a complex prose narrative, faithful to every convention that such a work demands. Ismat is telling us a story, the story covers a long period of time, the characters are dynamic and well-drawn, the various arcs follow specific patterns of rising and falling action, of conflict and denouement.

During my research, as I was checking historical facts and the correct spelling of names, I realised that the *marsiyas* were not all that she had assiduously read; she had also consulted authentic historical texts for details and additions to what she had found in the poetry. Her reading and research would have been a focused,

purposeful process. The most remarkable passages in her writing are the battle scenes—I am quite sure that she outdoes Nasim Hijazi, known for his battlefield imagery. There are the names of weapons, terminology related to warfare, military practices, procedures; instruments of plunder and pillaging; single combat fights between two warriors; attacks; call to arms; bloody skirmishes; the art of swordsmanship; the role of horses in battle; the art of horsemanship; various ploys and moves—the list is long. Of course, many of these features are to be found in Anis as well, but it requires special discernment and literary skill to make them an integral part of the prose narrative.

I have been translating Ismat since 1984, and each time *Qatra* hovered as the next project; and each time I passed it over for some other work of hers. In 2018, I read Akbar Hyder's *Karbala*, was deeply moved and inspired by his insights on the experience of mourning and its relationship to literature. What a wonderful book on Karbala, I thought, and how important to make it possible for readers interested in the subject to read Ismat's novel about it. The desire to take it up was compelling and I began the translation slowly and hesitantly. With each page I worked on, my resolve faltered. Reading the novel closely, staying with each paragraph for long periods of time, returning to re-read and review, all this stirred deep feelings anchored in my own experience of mourning, for the tragedy that befalls Husain and his family. Each engagement with the written page became a *majlis* for me, an interlude of mourning that we, Shias, participate in from childhood. Every word is engraved in our consciousness as an act of absolute remembrance and sorrow. I would read, weep, and translate. I felt as though Muharram, the period of mourning, was never going to end.

But the story also provided the impetus to continue, for there was newness here despite familiarity, moments that were revelatory, a heightened sense of reality. Karbala became a place populated with not just these godly, sublime individuals, but

a fearsome, cruel desert, a battlefield where real men, women and children suffered in the most dreadful way at the hands of a savage, unrelenting army, led by men whose conscience had abandoned them. For the first time I experienced, through Ismat's story-telling and her language, an atmosphere and mood that embellished decades-old images cast in history and tradition. It is true that the novel, by her own admission, derives from the *marsiyyas* of Mir Anis, long and elegiac accounts of the tragedy, but Ismat transforms the high art of poetry into the everyday pathos of real time, real people with real emotions.

As Shia mourners, we have listened to accounts of the battle, the martyrdom of Husain and his sons, nephews, companions and friends, the journey of the rest of his family, captives as they were called, from Karbala in Iraq to Damascus in Syria, under the courageous leadership of his sister, Zainab Bint Ali. The accounts are tragic, but we are conditioned to the despair and sorrow they invoke. Reading the related sections in *Qatra*, I was face to face, for the first time, with the physical reality of the discomfort and distress faced by these beloved characters, saw pictures in my mind's eye that I do not see when I'm listening to the narration at a *majlis*, of garments stiff with blood that has dried, the unwashed faces and bodies of men, women and children, hair matted, covered in blood, sweat and sand. In paintings of Karbala, the women are depicted in long, flowing, translucent garments, the men resplendent in uniforms, albeit spattered with blood, but blood that is bright red against hazy backgrounds. Faces are blurred, but everything looks so clean, so luminous. In reality, conditions in the camps at the end of the day are dire. There has been no water for three days to drink or for ablutions, and bodies covered in blood and sand would have been coming in all day. In fact, there is no change of clothes during the travel to Damascus either, and when Yazid's wife, Hind brings food and clothing to the captives in prison, Zainab refuses to take them. She wants to return to Medina with proof of the cruelties that have been inflicted on them.

Ismat's narrative of the suffering of Husain's family, the true anguish and sorrow of their lives during the battle of Karbala, and later in the prison in Damascus, creates images that are raw and unforgettable. And on his return to Medina, Zainul Abidin's last words become an anthem for the oppressed everywhere:

...When the blood of innocent people is shed, the blood of Husain will become more vivid. People will chant Husain's name when they take a stand against tyranny. Victory is free from the bounds of life and death, only the virtuous idea achieves victory.*

TAHIRA NAQVI
New York, October 2019

* Ismat Chughtai, *Ek Qatra-e-Khoon*: 333.

Introduction*

At first, I wrote a great deal about domestic entanglements, about girls, about children. When I arrived in Bombay the Communist Party took hold of me, and it was under the spell of the red flag that I cast many a story in a hue distinct from that of the older ones. Later still, I became immersed in films, and thus wrote short stories and novels depicting the film world. Little by little, I grew tired of all such themes. When there was nothing left to write, I began to read the *marsiyas* of Anis—in five volumes,[†] wherein I found the immensely heart-rending story of Imam Husain. I then attended *majlis*es during Muharram; I beheld processions [*jalus*] and, on numerous occasions, the *matam* [self-flagellation]. What was it, I wondered, that affected people so deeply? What sort of *movement* [in English in the originals]? Bearing that in mind, I wrote a novel, *Ek Qatra-e-Khoon*, which depicts just what kind of arsenal one individual employed in combatting imperialist powers, fourteen hundred years ago. *Gardan kata'i, lekin sar nahin jhukaya*—To have one's head lopped off rather than bow in submission. To let one's entire family be obliterated. Still others, tragedies of great magnitude, which followed in their wake, but which were forgotten. Not a single book or novel in India has been based on Genghis Khan, Tamerlane, or Nader Shah; but on Imam Husain were penned scores of *marsiyas*, essays, and tomes. I read as many of these as I could find, and what became evident was that the inclusion of that incident [i.e. the Battle of Karbala] as part of religion [*mazhab*] was what gave it such importance—the reason why it retains such freshness,

* First presented as a paper for the Ismat Chughtai centenary symposium held at the Hagop Kevorkian Center, New York University, October 15, 2014.

† Ismat is alluding, perhaps, to *Marasiyi Mir Anis* (Lucknow: Matba-i Taj Kumar, Naval Kishor Press, 1958).

as though it had taken place yesterday. What I have rendered into novel form is this incident [vaqiyah].*

Thus remarked Ismat Chughtai in response to an interview question about *Ek Qatra-e-Khoon* (One Drop of Blood), her tenth and last completed novel, published in 1976, though not without considerable difficulty. No one, she hastened to add, had been willing to take a risk on such a novel, controversial as it was, and remains, for its fictionalised portrayal of some of Islam's most revered personalities—including the Prophet himself. And then, of course, this was a thoroughly experimental work of fiction, no trashy, forgettable little addition to this or that burgeoning 'pocket book' series, the likes of which, by the late 1960s, had taken Urdu publishing by storm: Hind Pocket Books; Janata Pocket Books; Vijay Pocket Books; Star Publications; Mashvarah Book Depot; the Asha and Prince Pocket Books series of the Permanent Publishing Cooperative Society; and Ahluwalia Book Depot respectively—all these in Delhi. And, from Allahabad, the pocket books series brought out by Nafis Publications, and later those of Nikhat Pocket Books and Kusum Prakashan. Even Feroz sons Limited, from across the border in Lahore, could boast of a pocket books list, though not of works of fiction; rather, *intikhabs*, or selections of verse from various poets: Amir Minai, Nazir Akbarabadi, Hali, Insha', Dagh, and Khvajah Mir Dard. Karachi, too, had become home to a publishing venture known as Urdu Pocket Books, which was responsible, among other things, for introducing a great many Indian authors, including Jilani Bano and Gulshan Nanda, in said format. This a complex phenomenon, which bears further discussion elsewhere; suffice it to say here that the trend—namely,

* Yunus Agaskar, "İşmat Chughtai se guftugu," in Jamil Akhtar (ed.) *Ismat Chughtai Naqad ki Kasauti Par* (New Delhi: International Urdu Foundation, 2001): 73–4 [47–75].

the inevitable turn to “paperbacking,”* with its openly exploitative royalty system—was in many ways responsible for degrading the talents of the otherwise masterful Krishan Chander, and to some extent, those of Khwaja Ahmad Abbas and Rajinder Singh Bedi, as well. In returning to *Ek Qatra...*, one may note, just by looking at the material object, that it is of an altogether different stripe: in hardback octavo format, the original edition published by Bombay’s Fann aur Fankar, makes liberal use of red ink in its front matter. And from there onwards the novel slowly reveals itself to be subversive, prescriptive even, though not in the least formulaic: “Yih chaudah sau sal purani kahani,” writes Ismat, “aaj ki kahani hai”—this story of fourteen hundred years ago is today’s story.

Ek Qatra, whose English translation lies before the reader, is as emotionally and intellectually demanding, as baffling and complex a text as one will encounter. When it has been read at all—that is, beyond the well-known Preface from which I have quoted—the novel has been approached and critiqued almost exclusively against its fidelity, or not, to the *marsiyas* of Mir Babar Ali Anis (1802–1874), foremost exponent of the genre, to whom the present work is dedicated, and the substance of whose threnodies or elegies, Ismat herself tells us, is what is here novelised. And so no surprise, then, that in his overwhelmingly hostile contemporary review of the novel, Zoe Ansari proceeds to fault Ismat for trying to upstage Anis—an exercise all the more futile, because, as he sees it, the author essentially leaves the reader no better off for having made the effort.[†] Ishrat Ara Sultanah, too, hastily dismisses the novel as being irrelevant to the theme under exploration, and why, because surely, a self-confessed adaptation of a seventh-century succession battle with the Ummayad

* I borrow the term from Kenneth C. Davis, *Two-Bit Culture: The Paperbacking of America* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984).

† Z. Ansari, *Kitab Shinasi* (Bombay: Maktabah-yi Jamiah, 1981), 237–41.

dynasty at Karbala would have no bearing on contemporary Indian society.* More recently, however, critics have in passing, taken note of some of the ways in which Ismat breathes new life into her subject matter. Here, and perhaps somewhat predictably, what has often been highlighted is the accentuation of female characters—more specifically, the feminine voice—in the text.[†] And yet, to quote Syed Akbar Hyder, even by Ismat's own standards that treatment remains “meek”[‡]—a conclusion I shall presently attempt to disprove in my own take on the novel. The only sympathetic reading of *Ek Qatra* that I could lay my hands on is a review by Sharib Rudaulvi, published in an issue of *Asri Adab*, which is all praise, really, except that by the end the reviewer casts doubt on the genre of the text, its very *novel-ness*, which for him, is contrived at best.[§]

What I wish to impress upon the reader is that *Ek Qatra* has largely been misread—or, perhaps, that it has not been read carefully enough, that the narrative is a multilayered one, and as such lends itself to several possible readings, only one of which—spread across the novel's first hundred pages or so—I will have some opportunity to explore here. This reading, which I will call allegorical, leads one back to that haunting line from the author's preface: “*Yeh chaudah sau sal purani kahani aaj ki kahani hai*”. Even the most casual reader of the novel will

* Ishrat Ara Sultanah, *Ismat ka Samaji Shuur, Navilon ki Raushni Men* (Patna: Book Emporium, 1986).

[†] See, for instance, Syed Akbar Hyder, *Reliving Karbala: Martyrdom in South Asian Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), and Talat Mah, *Ismat Chughtai ki Fiction nigari* (Aligarh: Educational Book House, 2009). The most authoritative gendered study of Anis's *marasi* remains Salihah Abid Husain's *Khavatin-i Karbala, Kalam-i Anis ke Aine Men* (New Delhi: Maktabah-yi Jamiah, 1973).

[‡] Hyder, *Reliving Karbala*: 197.

[§] Sharib Rudaulvi, “*Ek qatra-e-khoon*”, in *Ismat Chughtai Naqad ki Kasauti Par*: 393–401.

immediately notice Ismat's seemingly anachronistic usage of certain words and phrases throughout the text. Take, for instance, the very early references, again in seventh-century Arabia, to a "middle class" (*darmiyani tabqah*); "capitalism" (*sarmayadari*); "fascist system" (*fashist nizam*); "free and fair election" (*azad intikhab*); "human rights" (*insani haqq*); and so on. To his credit, Ansari picks up on some of these in his review,* but then just as quickly dismisses them as mere anachronisms of a careless novelist. (He goes so far as to accuse Ismat of a certain measure of "*changeziyat*," or barbarism in her composition of the text.) Ansari is, I think, mistaken. And to prove this, let me quote at length a most revealing passage describing the debaucheries of the novel's main antagonist, Yazid, son of Mu'awiya, founder of the Ummayad dynasty: .

The heir-presumptiveness of Yazid had cast its madness over Amir Mu'awiya. Large scale *propaganda* [English in the original] efforts were in full effect. Yazid was sure of his deservedness. He had limitless riches at his disposal, was exceptionally handsome, as well as revered. A savant of fashion, he would perpetually conceive of some new foppishness or the other. Such images of love and passion would he sketch in his poetry, that people would be left dumbfounded. He was an avid hunstman. Dozens of highly-bred dogs were sent for him from Europe. A connoisseur of drink and of women, his palace housed a specimen of beauty from every nook and corner of the world. Aware of his son's predilections, the Amir would seek out and bequeath to him such samplings from near and distant lands.

Yazid's palace was host to strange and unheard of sexual escapades. Ensconced at the heart of this edifice there was yet another palace, this one made of Italian marble[...].†

One ought to pause here, so as to cut short a long story. Suppose the individual about whom the reader has learned is not Yazid,

* Ansari, *Kitab Shinasi*: 240–41.

† Ismat Chughtai, *Ek Qatra-e-Khoon: Ek Novel* (Bombay: Fan aur Fankar, 1976): 63.

but, rather, Sanjay Gandhi? This Europe, after all, would appear industrialised well beyond the seventh century; the domestic space, not to mention the dogs, are all uncannily reminiscent of Teen Murti Bhavan, its private zoo; and, then, of course, what to make of the marble, a likely favourite of the Nehrus and the Gandhis? The point is that now, suddenly, Ismat's anachronisms no longer present themselves to us as such. For if such early passages from *Ek Qatra* may be read, however tenuously, as allegorical satire on what was the then in-full-swing Emergency (and this is not an interpretation I have come across anywhere else) then perhaps the same may hold true of the later sections as well. Why, for instance, does Ismat describe the punishment meted out to Yazid's adversaries as an "*ilaj*"—a reference, perhaps, to the dreaded, forced sterilisation inflicted upon the urban poor during that dark period? Or, perhaps, one might translate that word, "*ilaj*," more literally, as "treatment," which, after all, was how Indira Gandhi described the Emergency—"shock treatment," she called it, a phrase coined by Milton Friedman, and then very much in vogue in Pinochet's Chile. There are, moreover, numerous parallels that can be drawn between, say, uprooted slum-dwellers during the Emergency and, in this novel, the exiled caravan of Husain. The latter, readers are informed at one point, is forced to give up its dream of populating a "*nai basti*"—a rather utopian, likely socialist, housing settlement. And this is also perhaps why Ismat, on numerous occasions (and I have myself counted more than half a dozen) employs the late-Mughal term "*mulk-giri*" (plunder, conquest) when describing the militaristic designs of Yazid: revenue-extracting and tributary, in the older sense, rather than, strictly speaking, territorially expansive. In mentioning fascism and its appeal to a kind of Lumpen proletariat elsewhere in the novel, Ismat is quite possibly engaging a long tradition of such analyses in the Marxist tradition, beginning of course with Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire*. There is even a brief aside on Hitler, as if to belabour the point. To be sure, then, *Ek Qatra* is a novel,

like many of the best in its tradition, that has allegorical elements, but cannot ultimately be termed an allegory. For, indeed, this is a far more complex work of fiction.

Let me close this very brief introduction, then, by stating that if I have omitted Anis from the discussion, it is not because his presence is overdetermined in critical appraisals of the work, but because the *marsiyas* of Anis—and there are scores of them—tell us little, if anything, of the period before Husain and his caravan's departure for Kufa. Ismat, in the first third or so of the novel, is then more or less on her own, even as, in her own words, she is attempting to novelise what she calls Anis's "*andaz-i bayan*" (style, or way of saying things). In opting for allegory as a lens to better view the opening sections of this novel, one would seem better poised to appreciate what is at stake for Ismat in the act of writing, for it strikes me that she is anything but "meek" or careless in this regard. On the contrary, she lays the groundwork with precision, and in such a way that *Ek Qatra*, this "*aaj ki kahani*", speaking as it does to the turbulent moment of its own inception, speaks also to our own present. The All-India Progressive Writers' Association—note my use of "association" (*anjuman*) as opposed to "movement" (*tahrik*)—was a spent force by the mid-1950s; and its support, twenty years later, for Indira Gandhi's Emergency—doubtless in the footsteps of the Communist Party of India and the Soviet Union—was misguided, to say the least. This was something that the old guard would later repent. But one must not forget that there were others in the movement, Ismat of course, but also Abbas—the most Nehruvian of them all—who openly and courageously challenged the *Yazidiyat* of that interregnum. *Ek Qatra*, then, becomes an articulation of what I am calling the Progressive Movement's *arrière-garde*, or rearguard—that singular formation, in some ways the last hope, which fights a dying a battle while the advance guard is under attack, or

otherwise in retreat.* The other feat Ismat's novel accomplishes is that it lays open, at long last, the movement's very own unconscious—namely, Anis himself, whom following Erich Auerbach on Dante, one might call a kind of “poet of the secular world,”† and whose essentially devotional, and yet technically ‘advanced’—dare I say, *taraqqi-pasand*—aesthetic paves the way for the encounter with the novel, as well as a host of other poetic forms with which the movement began to experiment widely from the 1930s onwards. *Ek Qatra* we might then say is Ismat's tribute to a master poet, that *khuda-i sukhan*, but it is not at all a transcreation—even in the latter sections, which are often faithful renditions of Anis's *marsiya* texts, and wherein she sometimes quotes him directly. This, I believe, is the point missed by critics. And it is one that ought to be kept in mind when reading this historical, but also timely and, in a sense, timeless, novel.

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* On the notion of the *arrière-garde* in a variety of twentieth-century literary contexts, see William Marx (ed.) *Les arrière-gardes au XXe siècle: l'autre face de la modernité esthétique* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2008).

† See Erich Auerbach, *Dante: Poet of the Secular World* [1961], trans. Ralph Manheim (New York: New York Review of Books, 2007).

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Imam Husain's Family in Karbala

Imam Husain, younger son of Imam Ali Ibn Abi Talib and Fatima Bint Muhammad. Older brother, Imam Hasan was assassinated after he became Caliph.

Zainul Abidin, Imam Husain's oldest son, ailing and unable to fight in Karbala, mother Shehr Bano.

Ali Akbar, Imam Husain's eighteen-year-old son, martyred in Karbala, mother Umme Laila.

Ali Asghar, Imam Husain's six-month-old son, martyred in Karbala, mother Umme Rubab.

Sakina, Imam Husain's young daughter, died in prison in Damascus, mother Umme Rubab.

Zainab Bint Ali, Imam Husain's younger sister.

Aun and Muhammad, Zainab's young sons, martyred in the battle of Karbala, father Abdullah Ibn Jafar.

Qasim Ibn Hasan, Imam Hasan's older son married to Fatima Kubra, Imam Husain's daughter, martyred.

Abdullah Ibn Hasan, Imam Hasan's youngest son, martyred in Karbala.

Abbas Ibn Ali, Imam Husain's half-brother, martyred in Karbala, mother Ummul Buneen.

Abbas's younger brothers, Jafar, Abdullah and Osman, Husain's half brothers, martyred in Karbala.

To Anis

Because I have found this story in his marsiyas.

Preface

This is the story of those seventy-two people who took a stand against imperialism in order to defend human rights—

This fourteen-hundred-year-old story is today's story as well, because man is still man's greatest enemy—

For today, too, the standard-bearer of humanity is man—

Today, too, when a Yazid raises his head in some part of the world, Husain steps forward and crushes him—

Even today, light wins against darkness.

ISMAT CHUGHTAI

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Dawn

Echoing in the air were celestial songs. Carried on the breeze was the rustling of the wings of angels. Bathed in the glow of an enchanted light, the entire universe was shimmering.

The great leader bowed his head in respect for the blessed child who was about to come into the world. The moon and stars were sparkling with a new luminosity, a new radiance. The city's lights shone with an unusual lustre and brightness.

The Glorious One, the Merciful One, had fixed his attention on earth. Today, His most beautiful masterpiece was about to be realised.

The daughter of the Prophet, the beloved wife of Ali Ibn Abi Talib, was in the throes of labour. Her delicate, flower-like face was drenched in the dew of perspiration, in her tearful eyes, the pain that is every mother's reward. Carrying his older son, Hasan in his arms Ali Ibn Abi Talib was pacing about restlessly. The awareness that his cherished wife was in pain was tormenting him. At times like this a woman needs her mother. Ali's lips moved restlessly in prayer.

“O protector and nurturer of the world, please have mercy on this motherless girl.”

Drained by the suffering of his daughter, the leader of the world, the Prophet of God, was nervously walking back and forth on the verandah. The anguish of a mother is something only a mother can fully understand, no one else can share this pain.

The Prophet of Islam had raised his daughter, Fatima with all the comforts of life. This was a time when the barbaric Arabs buried their daughters alive, the female offspring was considered degrading and inauspicious. Along with the other abominations prevalent during this age of ignorance, the Prophet of Allah had also raised his voice against this shameful practice. To validate his pronouncement he had bestowed upon his daughter all those entitlements that an individual in a civilised world should have. He loved her dearly. With great dedication and interest, he had enriched her life with the wealth of learning. He respected her immensely. Whenever he saw her approaching, he stood up as a mark of respect. When people saw the man before whom great emperors kneeled, treat his daughter with such dignity, they too began to value and respect their daughters. To be the father of a daughter was not a curse, it was now regarded an honour.

When Fatima Zehra reached maturity, she started receiving proposals from princes and kings, but Rasulullah refused everyone. People were very curious to see what kind of husband he would select for his daughter. What was he thinking? How long would he keep his grown daughter at home?

But the daughter was not a burden for her father, someone to be handed over to just anyone who came along to reduce his burden. She was his daughter, his cherished child. For her, he wanted a husband who would be the perfect individual, someone who would be as dear to him as she was.

The Prophet of God needed a helper, a supporter to take his message to the people, a companion who could share his

burden, in whom he could place his trust, who would imbibe his message within his soul and convey it to others. At that time, there were only seven individuals who had accepted Islam. They lived in constant danger and worshipped in secret. During an assembly, Rasulullah expressed his desire for a supporter and called out: "Who among you is ready to be my companion and helper?"

The most respected members of the Banu Hashim were present at this assembly, but no one rose to the Prophet's call. People were reluctant to openly express their support; they were hesitant because they were afraid of their adversaries. The Prophet gazed at everyone, but people remained silent, their eyes averted.

Then, a boy, barely ten or twelve years old, stood up and said boldly: "Prophet of God, I am ready to be your companion and helper."

Everyone burst into loud laughter. How could a young boy assume such a great responsibility? But the Prophet's countenance shone with joy. In an instant, the cloud of anxiety and disquiet vanished from his face and he came forward and placed his hand on the boy's shoulder. That young boy was the Prophet's paternal uncle's son, his cousin-brother, Ali Ibn Abi Talib. The Prophet was truly impressed by his courage and his frankness.

"Maturity does not come with age, it comes with intelligence and courage," he said.

"Ya Rasulullah, I have always had weak eyesight, my body is not strong either, but my heart is obedient to you," Ali Ibn Abi Talib said innocently, and the Prophet broke into a smile. That day he found his dearest friend, his most diligent student and a brave and valiant crusader. The Prophet gave special attention to his education. The two became inseparable, the

tall young man and boy. When Ali matured into a young man, he continued to follow the Prophet like a shadow, remaining at his side during historic campaigns. Ali was very dear to the Prophet and whenever a dangerous situation arose, he told Ali to take the lead. He trusted Ali and Ali obeyed his every order without hesitation.

Soon, Ali's valour became legendary. Victory was his handmaiden. He was successful in every campaign he undertook. He fought without a shield, carrying two swords at the same time, one in each hand, as his shield. People called him Saifullah or "the sword of God".

A few of Ali Ibn Abi Talib's friends said to him: "Why don't you try your luck? The Prophet likes you very much. He will certainly accept your proposal for his daughter."

But Ali said, "How can I be so bold? How can I stand a chance when kings and princes have been turned down? I'm a poor man."

"You may not have any wealth, but the Prophet is very fond of you," his friends replied. "We think he already approves of you but is feeling a little diffident saying anything to you. It is your duty to take your proposal whether he accepts it or not."

Ali Ibn Abi Talib lowered his head and fell into deep thought. There was nothing hidden about the fact that the Prophet liked him and Ali's bravery was known far and wide. Yet, he was not conscious of his talents, he had no illusions about himself. He was poor, the lands he had conquered were not for himself, they were for Islam. He had no palatial mansion, no gold and jewels nor any slaves and slave-girls. He worked hard to make ends meet. He was especially fond of cultivating gardens. Whenever he had time between battles, he would plow and irrigate arid land, plant date

palms, nurture them painstakingly and when the orchard was ready, he would offer the fruit to someone as a gift.

He had been watering plants when his friends insisted that it was his right as well as his duty to send a proposal for Fatima Zehra.

He put down the pail, went home, took a bath, put on a shirt he had washed himself and which was mended in many places, and then left the house. Ali had barely reached the Prophet's doorstep when he heard him say, "Open the door, Umme Salma, a very dear guest has come."

When she opened the door, Umme Salma saw Ali standing there, looking bashful, his head bowed. Ali was twenty-one at the time.

"Come in, Ali, why are you standing outside?"

Ali walked in, looking very flustered, perspiring nervously. His hands were clasped together tightly. This was a difficult moment.

The Prophet smiled at him. From Ali's demeanor and appearance he had guessed the reason for the visit. But he wanted to hear what Ali had to say. Suppressing his smile he said, "You look a little worried, Ali. What is the matter?"

"Ya Rasulullah, I have come to offer my proposal for your daughter, Fatima Zehra."

"Hunh, do you have anything to offer for the mehr?" he asked, smiling.

"No, nothing. All I have are the clothes on my body, a horse, my sword and a shield."

"A sword is essential for a soldier and you cannot do without a horse, but why do you need a shield? God is your protector, you need no other protection."

Ali Ibn Abi Talib presented his shield as the mehr. The Prophet then sent for his daughter.

"Fatima, Ali is standing before you. He has asked for your hand. Tell me, what is your wish?"

Fatima did not lift her eyes, she could not say anything.

Thrice the father asked the daughter the same question and when she didn't say anything, he said, "This means you like Ali, you accept this proposal, you are quiet because you are feeling shy."

Fatima Zehra still remained silent.

Rasulullah consulted with some friends. The shield that Ali had presented as mehr was used to buy a dowry for Fatima Zehra—two stone-mills, two water pots, one spinning wheel, a chadar, and a few cups and plates.

The Prophet was Ali's only elder. The money that was left was used to arrange a walima celebration. The Prophet said to Ali, "Go Ali, invite the citizens of Medina to your walima."

Ali became very nervous. Such a small amount of food and an invitation to the entire citizenry, rich and poor, of Medina! He was baffled but could not utter a word. He thought, what a catastrophe it would be if everyone in Medina received an invitation and they all decided to come. It would cause a great deal of embarrassment. So he stood on a mound of earth and called out in a low voice, "O people of Medina! Ali Ibn Abi Talib invites you to his walima, please grace the occasion with your presence."

Ali thought if he made the announcement in a quiet voice only those who were close by would come while those out of earshot would not. It was best if there were only a few guests since there was very little food.

But the breeze decided to cause a mischief and carried Ali's voice and his news into every street and neighbourhood.

When Ali came back, the ground shifted from under his feet. There was a huge crowd waiting for him. People were arriving on foot and on camel. The wedding of the Prophet's daughter and an invitation to Ali's walima, who would be foolish enough to stay away? All the inhabitants of Medina turned up.

"Ya Rasulullah, how will we feed everyone? Look at how many guests we have," Ali said apprehensively.

"Don't worry, God willing we will not run out of food."

And that is what happened. Everyone ate and there was still food left over. No one had come there to satisfy a gnawing hunger, everyone was full with just one blessed morsel.

The Prophet placed the hand of his beloved daughter, Fatima Zehra in those of his dearest companion and comrade, the most accomplished of his protégés, and offered his thanks to God.

Fatima Zehra's room suddenly glowed with radiance. There was light everywhere. Asma emerged in a flurry from the room.

"Ali! Ali! Felicitations on the birth of your son. By God's grace, he's as beautiful as the moon."

Ali heaved a sigh of relief and tears flowed from his eyes. The Prophet of God was also listening. He hurriedly came forward.

"Give him to me, Asma, where is my son, show him to me."

"A little patience, I will clean and bathe him and then bring him to you."

"There's no need to bathe him, he is pure, Allah has blessed him with divine purity. Give him to me as he is."

Asma swaddled the child in a yellow cloth and brought him out. The Naana gathered him into his arms and kissed him.

"Ali, look at him, Allah has favoured you and Fatima by giving you a son. He is truly blessed. One day, he will be the helper and leader of the world. People will remember his great deeds until the end of time. Ali, felicitations to you on the birth of a son who is unparalleled!"

Ali smiled. "He is yours. You have a greater right over him than I do. The greatness he achieves will be because of you. He will be raised in your care, may Allah grant him your everlasting protection."

The Prophet of God placed the infant on his knees, recited the *azaan* in one ear, the *iqamat*, the second call to prayer, in his other ear, and then kissed his tiny silky-smooth hands.

Childhood

Hasan and Husain were close to each other in age, barely a year apart. Rasulullah loved his grandsons. None of his sons had survived and so he raised his grandsons as his own. When he was with them he was simply Naana, their maternal grandfather. This simplicity was a sign of his greatness. His love for them was so powerful that he couldn't bear to stay away from them for long. In the morning, he left his house and headed straight for his daughter's to inquire after the boys.

“Did they sleep well? They didn't cry at night, did they?”

“Yes, Baba, they were all right, you worry too much about them,” his daughter would reply with a laugh.

Satisfied, he would then make his way to the mosque. While returning he would stop by once again to see the children, play with them for a while and then go home. When he embarked on a journey, he took a long time to bid farewell to the children and went to see them the moment he returned.

When the children were a little older, he started taking them to the mosque. There, the boys played and sometimes even climbed on his shoulders while he was offering the namaaz. One day, while Rasulullah was giving a sermon Husain suddenly came running towards him, stumbled and fell. Naana rushed towards him, picked him up and held him in his arms to comfort him. Only after Husain had calmed down did he return to his sermon. Rasulullah

loved all children. The wails of a child always disturbed him. Children were, after all, the future of the world.

Hasan and Husain received the same love from their Naana, but despite that, once in a while, the boys fussed and argued over who was his favourite. One day, they both wrote something on their tablet and went to ask Naana, “Whose handwriting is better?”

He replied, “Show these to your Baba and ask him; he has excellent handwriting.”

The children went to their father.

“Go to your mother, she will tell you,” Baba said.

When they took the case to their mother, she was not sure what she should say. “Both of you have very nice handwriting.”

“No, no, tell us who has the better handwriting?” the children insisted.

“It is difficult to say, but wait, here’s what you can do.” Fatima Zehra took off the pearl necklace from around her neck and scattered the beads on the floor.

“Now, whoever picks up the most pearls will be regarded as the one with the best handwriting.”

The children quickly started gathering the pearls. One of these pearls had split into two. Each brother picked one half. When all the pearls had been collected it turned out that they each had an equal number, and each one had one half of the broken pearl.

“This means you both have very good handwriting.”

The children were convinced.

“But remember, this does not mean there is no room for practice and improvement.”

Rasulullah spent most of his spare time at his daughter’s house. One day, he was sitting on the bed with a blanket

wrapped around him. Fatima Zehra happened to walk into the room. Her father's lap was now usually reserved for his grandsons. She felt a wave of love for him and said, "Baba, I am cold."

"Come, come sit with me under my blanket." He drew his daughter close to him. She sat with her head on her father's shoulder.

When Ali saw them like this, he smiled and said, "Ya Rasulullah, I am also feeling cold."

"Come, no one is stopping you. The space under my blanket is huge."

Ali, too, joined them. When the children saw their place being usurped, they came running and got under the blanket as well.

Rasulullah, overwhelmed with love, drew them all close together and said with a smile, "We are all one. Our paths are one, our difficulties are one. The path is fraught with obstacles, there will be many setbacks along the way. You all belong to me, you are the heirs of my message, and you will spread my word across the world and touch the hearts of all people. I have faith in you. I know none of you will ever be remiss in your duty." He closed his eyes as the four of them contemplated their future responsibilities.

Even as children, Hasan and Husain knew that they could not afford to behave irresponsibly like other children. They were the Prophet's grandsons; the world's gaze was upon them. They had certain obligations they could not ignore, certain duties they could not renounce. But children are children, after all. Fortunate are those who grow up under the care and attention of wise elders. Such children learn to understand the finer points of life from an early age.

Once, a man presented Rasulullah with a fawn. Husain was playing, Hasan was sitting right there. So he took the fawn from his grandfather. When Husain saw the fawn in Hasan's lap he began to sniffle.

"I want a fawn, too."

"Both of you should regard this fawn as yours," Naana said.

"No, it is Bhai's; he won't let me touch it."

Husain started sobbing so Hasan reluctantly let him pet the fawn. But Husain was not appeased, his tears would not cease. All of a sudden they saw a doe coming in their direction with another fawn.

"Here you go Husain, Allah has sent you a fawn as well. Come on, now smile," Naana said.

Husain smiled happily as he petted the fawn.

Naana said, "It seems that these two fawns belong to this doe. She came here looking for them following their trail. Let us give back her fawns."

The children felt sad.

"You will make the doe unhappy if you do not return her offspring to her. Just imagine how your mother would feel if someone snatched you both from her."

"Amma will cry and cry," the boys said.

"This doe will also cry and cry if she is separated from her children."

The boys immediately released the fawns. But the doe didn't run off with her little ones. She began nursing them right there and over time, made her home nearby. The boys played with her often.

The children learned compassion and consideration from their early days spent in Rasulullah's company and developed the habit of noticing the minutest thing. Once,

they became quite concerned when they saw an old man performing ablutions incorrectly in the mosque.

“Husain, the elderly gentleman is not performing *wuzu* properly,” Hasan whispered.

“Yes, but it will be rude if we correct him, he’ll feel bad.”

“But it’s wrong to see someone make a mistake and not correct him. He’s making an error unknowingly, but the fault will lie with us.”

After some thought, they came up with a solution. They went up to the gentleman and said, “You are wise, Sir, could you please see if we’re doing anything wrong while performing *wuzu*.” When the children commenced the *wuzu* routine the elderly gentleman realised he had made a mistake. He said, “Children, you were doing it properly. It was I who was doing it wrong. Thank God you made me aware otherwise I would have continued making a mistake.”

Whenever Fatima Zehra saw her father showering the children with so much love and attention she would say, “Baba, don’t spoil them, they will develop bad habits, they will become wilful and disobedient, they won’t do as they’re told.”

“No child develops bad habits if he is loved. He will learn to give and receive love. One who learns to give and receive the gift of love brings blessings into this world.”

Hasan and Husain received so much love from their grandfather and their parents that they never felt deprived of anything. Sometimes there would not be any food in the house, their clothes would be darned with patches, but their hearts were always overflowing with love. An attachment to material possessions that grows into a hunger for acquisition never took root in their hearts. They learned to laugh and be happy in the midst of scarcity.

Once, on Eid, everyone was dressed up in glittering new clothes and making their way to the Eidgah. Hasan and Husain's garments, on the other hand, were old and shabby. They were only children, after all, so they burst into tears. Naana became distressed when he saw them. He asked, "Why are you crying?"

"Our clothes are old and full of patches, we are ashamed."

Rasulullah bent down and, one by one, he kissed each patch on their clothes and then said, "Your patches are very dear to me because these clothes have been made from your father's hard-earned money. Now tell me, you don't dislike the patches any more, do you?"

The children felt as if each patch was like a glittering star. They broke into happy laughter.

"There are patches on your clothes, too," they said.

"It makes no difference if one's clothes are old and worn. It is the soul that we have to protect from becoming tarnished."

A little while later, the children saw people going to the mosque on camels. Once again, their faces fell.

"What is it now?" Naana asked lovingly.

"Everyone is riding a camel, why are we going on foot?"

"You don't have to walk. Come, climb on my shoulders."

Saying so, he lifted the children onto his shoulders. When people saw Allah's Prophet walking with his grandsons straddled on his shoulders, they, too, alighted from their camels and hoisting their children on their shoulders, set off on foot.

"Today, these children are on our shoulders, tomorrow they will carry the weight of the world on their shoulders," Rasulullah said. The children were overjoyed. Then, a little later, the boys thought of something else.

"Naana Jaan! Where are the reins of our camel?"

“Here, grab my hair.”

After a few moments, a new complaint arose.

“Naana Jaan!”

“Yes, my children.”

“The other camels are braying.”

Naana Jaan immediately began to imitate a camel’s call. The children were ecstatic. Again and again, they bent down and kissed their ‘camel’. It was a strange sight. People laughed cheerfully along with the children. An elderly man walked up to the boys and, with tears flowing from his eyes, he remarked, “Children, your vehicle is truly exceptional!”

“And the riders, too, are matchless,” Rasulullah said with a laugh. “Today, the future of the world is on my shoulders and our future is bright and dazzling.”

Perhaps he knew that one day his grandsons would suffer dreadful trials and tribulations just because they were the Prophet’s grandsons and he wanted to make up for it at this early stage of their lives. The manner in which his grandsons showed their appreciation and respect for their grandfather’s love was also unparalleled.

First, there was one grandfather and two grandsons. Then, a baby sister joined the brothers for a share in that love. Naana Jaan filled the hearts of the brothers with adoration for their little sister, Zainab. Both were devoted to her, a beautiful, cheerful girl who was cherished by all. Now Hasan would sit on one side of Naana’s lap, Husain on the other, and little Zainab would be ensconced in the middle. The three would fall asleep listening to his stories. The Prophet’s feet would become numb but he would not stir. When his daughter came to pick them up he would signal her to not disturb them. “Let them be. If they are woken up from deep sleep, they will be tired and restless.”

Showered with so much love and attention, the children didn't think too much about the constant scarcity of food at home. It's always best to get up from the table when you are not yet full; nothing in the house is yours alone, others have rights over everything you own; no beggar must ever be turned away empty-handed, he can take what he wants, he must never be denied. Children learn what their elders teach them. If the grandfather and father had been ashamed of their threadbare clothes, the children would be too; if the mother complained about scarcity, the children would regard hardship as a great burden. Instead, these were children who believed their poverty was a sign of their special status. Allah had blessed them with the kind of patience and fortitude that wasn't dependent on gold and silver.

Fizza was a slave but Amma gave her better clothes to wear than her own, her chadar did not have as many patches as Amma's. No sooner had Amma wrapped herself in a new chadar than a needy person would come along begging and lamenting, and she would immediately give it away and wear the old one again.

But who cares? Every patch shines like the moon and the stars because every patch has the seal of Naana's kiss.

Amma takes good care of Fizza. One day Fizza manages the housework while the next day Amma does everything. Fizza is old and ailing so it is Amma who actually deals with most of the chores. Fizza suffers from shortness of breath when she moves around too much so Amma grinds the wheat on the millstone. Sometimes, when the boys see her drenched in sweat, labouring away at the millstone, they want to help. But, instead of making things easier, they end up jamming the millstone. Amma laughs when she sees

this and urges them to go and play, telling them that she is better off without their help.

That is when they both sit at a distance and silently watch her. Little Zainab, perched on Amma's knees, drinks milk. Beads of sweat glisten like pearls on Amma's forehead. How young and delicate, how beautiful is this pearl-studded Amma. God alone knows what she eats to sustain herself. No one has ever seen her enjoying her food or eating a full meal. Feeding others satiates her.

And when Baba Jaan returns home after a long day's work, his pockets are empty. On the way back, people either borrow most of the money he has made, a loan that is never returned, or a beggar's empty hand is filled.

Not a word of protest escapes from Amma's mouth. How can she reprimand Baba when she does the same thing? The dry roti is served, everyone sits at the dastarkhvan, the meal-cloth, when, suddenly, a beggar's voice is heard at the door and they instantly withdraw their hands that were reaching for the meagre food. The children are the first to run to the door and hand over their share to the beggar. Amma smiles, then wipes the millstone for some leftover flour and prepares two more rotis. Baba keeps the bottle of honey upside down for a long time. A few drops fall on the rotis and after the first morsel they all feel satiated. Water fills everyone up. Husain loves water. He drinks a lot of water and with such enjoyment. The moment he sits down for his meal, his hand reaches for the copper bowl of water.

Hasan makes fun of his habit.

"Husain, if the birds were to drink up all the water in the world, what would you do?" he teases his brother.

That is when Husain nervously looks into the water bowl and then at the thirsty bird perched on the wall. He places

the bowl before the bird and quietly observes her from a corner. The bird hesitantly approaches the bowl, dips her beak into it and takes a sip, then lifts her beak and swallows. Watching the water go down the bird's throat fills Husain's heart and soul with apprehension.

Impressed, Hasan looks at his younger brother and feels a strange sense of foreboding that makes his little heart flutter with fear.

"No, no Husain, there's so much water in the world; the birds won't drink it all. Of course, there will be water left for you."

And Husain takes a mouthful from the bowl from which the bird had a drink, closes his eyes, and savours it.

Fizza scatters dates on a mat to dry, quietly humming to herself:

*The crags have tumbled,
The sand is sobbing,
Arrows dart from the sun's bow,
The bee has stung the palate,
The poison slowly circulates into every fibre of my being,
The water is restive in the river's lap,
My beloved's water-pot overflows with drops of water.
I'm thirsty ...
From every fibre of my being ...*

Husain fills the copper bowl with water and takes it to her. She doesn't drink. Everyone bursts out laughing.

Baba sits in his chamber, deeply engrossed in working on the Qur'an, or he assists the slaves when they are chopping wood, collecting dates or doing repairs around the house. When Amma looks very tired, he takes the broom from her hand and finishes the sweeping himself. He is a great conqueror, a distinguished general, but he doesn't feel any task is beneath him.

But, sometimes, when Amma gets impatient with the hardships, she does complain. Each day is filled with anxiety. All the grain that comes is used up for feeding the guests. During Hajj, the pilgrims regard the house of the Prophet and his family as their own. People start arriving to see Baba early in the evening. He insists everyone stay for meals. Even the beggars know that they will not be sent away empty-handed and so the moment they enter the city they make their way towards this house.

When things became really difficult, it was decided that the garden of Fidak be sold. Baba made the deal and headed straight to the market to buy grain. There was nothing in the house. But before he could purchase the grain, he ran into a man who was weeping and lamenting.

“What is the matter, brother?” Baba asked, worriedly.

“I have suffered a terrible loss in my business. I am bankrupt and my creditors have seized my house. If I don’t give them the money by this evening they will throw my family out. My wife is pregnant, she is about to give birth, she will die if we are turned out on to the streets.”

Ali Ibn Abi Talib’s eyes welled. He gave all his money to the man.

“Brother, this is all I have. Give the money to your creditors and request them to give you some time. The rest of your debt will also be taken care of.”

The man fell at Ali’s feet. He had been wandering around all day seeking help and no one had come forward with any assistance.

“O Ali, you are the hand of God. The moment I have the means, I will return the loan.”

“This is not a loan. You don’t need to return it.”

In any case, it had been observed that when people borrowed money from Ali, they never felt the need to return it. And no one asked them for it either.

Fatima Zehra was waiting impatiently at home for the grain so that she could grind it and cook rotis. Little Zainab was hungry and crying in her sleep.

Ali returned with a sheepish look on his face. When Fatima Zehra heard what had happened she clasped the hem of his robe and said,

“Have you decided to kill me and my children by starving us?”

Ali stood before her with his head lowered.

“Please give me an answer.”

Rasulullah arrived at that moment. When he saw his daughter holding Ali’s robe, he turned pale. He quickly seized her hand.

“Fatima, do you know who this is?”

“Yes, this is my husband, Ali. Please ask him, do my children and I have no right over him? How long will we suffer?”

“Fatima, it is not the hem of Ali’s robe that you hold, it is mine. Demand an answer from me.”

Fatima let go of Ali. She lowered her head and said tearfully, “So you tell me, why did you marry me to a man who cannot provide two meals a day for me and my children?”

“Fatima, my child, I did not know you were so naïve. I chose the best man in the world for you. I did not know that you were so attached to worldly comforts that you would fail to recognise Ali’s greatness. At this moment, this man stands before you like a criminal. If he wishes he can become the ruler of a state or the sovereign of a kingdom. Have you forgotten his conquests? If he wants, he can set you up like a princess in

a marble palace where hundreds of maids would wait on you and, dressed in glittering brocade and silks, weighed down with gold and jewels, you could spend your days in luxury and comfort. Gold and silver platters filled with the finest luxury goods this world has to offer could be placed before you. With one wave of his hand this man can place the entire world at your feet. But he is Ali Ibn Abi Talib, he is the arm and hand of Islam, the world is his to do with as he pleases and you are demanding one plain roti from him? Today, he can't even give you this much. Do you know why? Because this is the path he has chosen for himself."

"Forgive me, Baba, if I have offended you. I do not need anything. What I cannot have without selling my conscience, I do not need. Please forgive me."

"Don't ask me for forgiveness, ask Ali."

"No, no, actually I have been remiss. I..." Ali said, his eyes lowered.

When Rasulullah heard the whole story he burst out laughing. He gave Ali some dirhams and said, "Is that all? Here, take this, Ali, and get some food." Then he said to his daughter, "You became so agitated over such a small thing? Do you know, you are not the daughter of an emperor, but of a poor prophet of God? And you are the wife of Ali, who is dearer to me than my own life. Whoever hurts Ali hurts me."

The grandfather then embraced the children and left. The little ones waited for their father. Evening turned to night, but there was no sign of him. Again and again, Fatima turned her gaze towards the door, she gave the children water and tried to put them to sleep, but there was still no sign of him.

It so happened that when Ali was returning with the grain, a poor unfortunate man fell at his feet and began to weep uncontrollably.

"Master, my family has been starving for three days. There is not a grain of wheat in my house, help me Master!"

Without a thought Ali emptied his bag of grain into the man's lap. After that he didn't have the courage to go home. With dragging feet, he walked to the mosque and sat on the steps.

When Rasulullah emerged from the mosque, in the half-darkness he saw a man sitting on the steps, his head bent. He came closer and was startled to see Ali.

"Ali, have the children eaten?"

"No, they haven't."

"Why?"

Ali hesitantly recounted the incident. Rasulullah started laughing.

"You are hiding here because you are afraid of your wife." He lifted him up by the arms and embraced him. The conqueror of Khyber, the victor of Hunain, the person whose very name invoked fear in the hearts of the enemy, was sitting on the steps of the mosque hiding from his wife and children. Rasulullah took him home, packed some food, and then went to his house with him. Everyone happily ate together.

That day, the children discovered what a great man their quiet, shabbily dressed father was.

Who knew that this lesson of giving generously to the needy would teach these innocent children to one day sacrifice their lives in the cause of truth and justice.

Hasan and Husain's childhood was a happy one. Despite the abundance of love from their grandfather, every now

and then, they would have cause for complaint, as children sometimes do. One day, after Fatima Zehra had finished her afternoon Asr prayer she heard Husain crying. She quickly got up and saw him walking towards her, weeping uncontrollably. The two brothers were like her two eyes, equally precious. But since Husain was the younger of the two, she became more agitated when she saw him cry.

“What happened, my precious one?” She enveloped him in her arms and picked him up. Husain was sobbing, he couldn’t talk.

“Hasan must have done something to upset you, he’s become very naughty. He’s always making my baby cry. Son, don’t play with him anymore. I’ll punish him severely as soon as he comes home. I’ll ask him what he did to make my child cry like this.”

“No Amma, Bhai is not the one who made me cry. I’m angry with Naana Jaan.”

“Oh God, Naana Jaan! Why?”

“Amma, smell my mouth, does my breath smell bad?”

“No my dearest, I can only smell the fragrance of fresh roses and musk,” she said, kissing his face.

“Naana Jaan kissed Bhai on the face and kissed me on my neck. Why?”

“My son, Naana Jaan loves you both very much. I don’t know why he kissed you differently. You didn’t do anything to offend him, did you?”

“I didn’t do anything wrong. Why is he angry with me?”

Fatima Zehra was perturbed.

“Let’s go, I will ask him why he is angry with you.”

Fatima put on her shoes, pulled her chadar over her head, lifted Husain in her arms and called out to Fizza, who, in turn, called for Salman and they all set out towards the mosque.

People were surprised when they saw the Prophet's daughter walking hurriedly towards the mosque; they wondered what had happened to make her rush to see her father. Rasulullah was sitting with his followers, discussing an important matter. The moment he saw his daughter he immediately stood up in respect, as was his custom. His companions dispersed quietly.

He was concerned when he saw tears in his daughter's eyes. With his face hidden in his mother's shoulder, Husain was sobbing, too. For a moment, the Prophet gazed at the mother and son with love and wonderment. It seemed to him as if the moon was in the sun's embrace. Then, he gently asked, "What is the matter, why is Husain crying?"

"Baba, do you love Husain?"

"There's no doubt in that."

"But do you love Hasan more?"

"How did you arrive at that conclusion?"

"From your attitude." Driven by maternal passion, Fatima Zehra continued without pausing, "You kissed your beloved Hasan's face, but you kissed my Husain on his neck. Why this discrimination? If you love them both equally, why this difference? I did not expect someone like you, who believes in justice and equality, to be unjust. It's you who spoils them both so much, and then you..."

"Is Husain angry with me?" Rasulullah inquired with a smile.

"Who else will he be angry with, if not you?"

Rasulullah did not answer. Lost in thought, he remained silent. When she saw that her father was not speaking, Fatima Zehra felt remorseful.

"Forgive me, Baba Jaan. If Husain has been remiss, please forgive him. I've brought him here to beg for your

forgiveness. Husain, fall at your grandfather's feet and ask for forgiveness. Whether he loves you less or more, you should remain obedient, there should be no complaints from you." Husain pressed his tiny palms together and placed his head at his grandfather's feet.

"Naana, I know you don't like me. My mouth smells, doesn't it?"

The Prophet of God first looked at his daughter, then at his grandson. His eyes filled with tears, he lifted Husain and held him to his breast.

Fatima Zehra started crying, too.

"You know I am poor, I can give these children nothing but maternal affection. I have raised them with the help of your love. If, God forbid, you are angry with them, then how will they live? They are panic-stricken if they don't see you even for a day."

But her father still remained silent. She became distressed when she saw tears in his eyes.

"No, my dearest Baba Jaan, I cannot bear to see you cry, I will never grumble again. God only knows what happened to me. I saw Husain's tears and lost control. You must have been busy with important matters and here I am troubling you with an insignificant little thing like this."

"Fatima, you know how dear your children are to me. The joy of living increases manifold when I see their faces. I kissed Hasan's face and I kissed Husain's neck—why, you ask? Perhaps I cannot give you a proper explanation or maybe you may not have the courage to hear what I have to say."

"By God, even if you give me the news of my impending death, I will listen to you happily. Your word is like the word of God for me. What is it that is so painful for you to talk about? I am not so weak that my courage will fail me."

“Fatima, my dearest, you are a mother. A mother’s heart is very fragile. But I know it’s also not right to conceal the truth from you. I have to clear your misunderstanding. A short while ago, when these two came to me and sat in my lap, a voice rose from my heart: ‘O Muhammad, one day, your grandsons will sacrifice their lives in the name of God.’ Hasan is very outgoing, he trusts everyone, he will be poisoned by his friends and loved ones. Husain is already so passionate about politics and soldierly arts. He won’t be taken in by threats, nor will he be intimidated by anyone, and for this reason he will fight back. Regardless of how high the mountain of lies and deceit is, he will not surrender.”

“My children will suffer from great calamities and you will stand by and watch? How will their father tolerate this?”

“I will not be around at that time and nor will Ali.”

“I pray that I do not see the day when your protection is snatched away from me, or I lose my husband. I am alive because I have both of you to support me. Who can dare to threaten my children or harm them while you are around? Baba, if my children suffer I will demand an answer from you.”

“No one can touch your children while I am alive. But Fatima, a day will come when I will not be here and Ali will not be here. What will happen then? I can already see the signs of what is to come. We know quite well who our friends are, and who are our enemies disguised as friends, lying in wait for the right moment to get to us. It’s no use trying to overlook the truth.”

“But what have my children done?”

“They are Ali’s children. Ali’s fearlessness, courage and rectitude are exemplary. There are many who genuinely believe in Ali’s superiority but there is also no dearth of those

who regard his qualities as a threat to their very existence. We also know of those who have accepted Islam with all their heart and we know of those who pay lip service to us. The moment my eyes are closed they will not hesitate to rear their heads."

"Why should anyone bear any malice toward Ali? He is a righteous man of God."

"Ali's compassion and his consideration have found a place in the hearts of the needy, but the ones who are hungry for power and glory are irked by his humility and tolerance."

"But what have my children done?"

"They are Ali's children and all the adversities that Ali has to deal with will be handed down to them as his legacy. Hasan and Husain will suffer the most, because the two boys have already started walking in Ali's footsteps."

"Are you saying Ali is not good enough for his children to follow in his footsteps?"

"If I begin to describe Ali's qualities, I fear I might give him such a status that people will start worshiping him. But Ali's path is strewn with thorns. Those who walk in his footsteps will face great trials. But I have complete faith that the boys will go through these trials with success."

"Ya Allah, what transgressions will my children be punished for?"

"Their biggest crime will be their innocence. Standing up for truth is not a game. The cruel and wicked in my community will try to coerce them into selling their conscience. I do not see your beloved children as conscience-sellers."

Saying this, he kissed Husain's lips.

"There, Husain, are you happy now? I've settled your complaint."

Husain burst out laughing and draping his arms around his Naana's neck, he said, "Naana Jaan, will my throat be slit?"

"Yes, my son."

"Will there be a lot of blood?"

"Yes, mighty mountains will drown in the blood."

"But Naana Jaan, you kissed my neck. Will this blessing not break the sword?"

"Yes, it will certainly break it. The sword of ruthlessness and tyranny will be shattered when it strikes your neck."

"Then please kiss my neck one more time."

Rasulullah was overjoyed by what the child said and he kissed his neck many times.

"Fatima, your son is very wise. Hasan is emotional, but this one will give his enemies a difficult time."

Rasulullah accompanied his daughter and grandson to their home. On the way, they ran into Hasan playing with some children. On seeing Husain perched on Naana's shoulder, the older brother insisted on climbing onto Naana's other shoulder. Rasulullah immediately lowered himself to the ground. Hasan climbed on. Carrying them both on his shoulders Rasulullah walked through the streets of Medina. When they arrived at Fatima Zehra house, he saw an expression of determination and pride etched across her face as he put the children down. There were no signs of the tears he had observed earlier.

"Baba Jaan, will the blood of my beloved children be spilled in vain?"

"No, the blood of those who sacrifice their lives on the path of truth is never spilled in vain. Their lives will provide a guiding light for future generations. Their names will wipe away oppression and ruthlessness from the world. Inspired by their courage, bravery, veracity and honesty,

their children too will sacrifice their lives. Those who give up their lives for the truth never die. People will mourn them until the end of time. Their killers will be reviled and ultimately forgotten. No one will claim them as their own.”

“I am a very fortunate mother, Baba Jaan.”

The First Sorrow

When Rasulullah went for his last Hajj both Hasan and Husain accompanied him. The two boys performed the duties of Hajj with their father and grandfather and saw for the first time the historical sites that they had heard their elders speak of so often.

On their way back, when Rasulullah and his family stopped at Ghadir Khumm, crowds surrounded the Prophet and his beloved grandsons. It was there that Hasan and Husain's grandfather threw light on the virtues of their father, Ali Ibn Abi Talib, for the first time.

The Prophet said, "Ali is very dear to me. He is my relative, my closest friend and my companion. I'm very pleased with his courage, his honesty, and his intellectual abilities. He is my heir, he will spread my message and I trust his work implicitly."

People heartily congratulated Ali and, for the first time, the children got a real glimpse of who their father truly was. They were extremely close to their grandfather, but their relationship with their father was somewhat reserved. Naana spoiled them, but they held their father in deference. Once, they heard a message that Naana had received from Allah and ran to recount it to their mother. But they hesitated and, before saying another word, asked, "Is Baba Jaan home?" Baba Jaan came out of his room, picked them up lovingly and encouraged them to share the message. But the boys were unable to shed their shyness.

Now, when they heard Naana praise their father, they both began to regard him with pride and respect. That was the day they discovered that their soft-spoken and self-effacing father was indeed a great man.

A short while after their return from Hajj, Rasulullah was afflicted by a fatal illness. Hasan was a little older than seven and Husain about a year younger.

As Naana's illness progressed, the agitation and anxiety among the family members also increased. Their mother could not stop crying. Baba Jaan was worried and spent his days and nights looking after Rasulullah. The children were distraught, and, again and again, they placed their heads on their grandfather's chest and wept. Rasulullah felt better when he saw the children, and smiling, he tried to comfort them.

Then came that ill-fated moment, the house was filled with people who had come to pay their respects. Everyone wept inconsolably. Rasulullah repeatedly turned his gaze towards Ali, as if he wanted to say something, but his voice would drown in the wails and laments. When things calmed down a little, Rasulullah lifted himself up with the support of those around him and said, "Death is inevitable. Why are you afraid of death? Depend on your righteous actions, everyone has to appear before their Creator one day. I have not come among you to stay here forever. I am going to my Master soon. I'm leaving Allah's book with you. One part of this book is in Allah's hands, the other in yours. Do not betray this book, do not be remiss in reading it. In it is everything to guide you towards the right path. Do not fight amongst yourselves. Do not be dishonest with your fellow men. This is Allah's command. Treat my relatives and friends

well, just as you have treated me. Like me, they too will give you righteous advice."

There was a state of unrest in the house. Rasulullah's hallowed head lay in Ali's lap. The children clung to his feet, weeping.

And then the lamp of Prophethood was extinguished.

The children's world of love and affection became desolate. Clouds of sorrow and gloom hung over the streets of Medina. There were whispers everywhere.

Some people came to Ali and advised him to take over the reins of the caliphate. But he was not thinking about anyone other than the Prophet at this moment. He bathed and purified the Prophet of Allah's body and after the funeral prayers, entrusted him to the earth.

Everything changed for the children after Naana passed away. The world began to show its devious, subversive ways. People began to turn away from them, as if they didn't know Ali or his family.

Hazrat Abu Bakr Siddiq was chosen as the Caliph. There were many who came to Ali and proclaimed that he was the true heir to the caliphate, but Ali ignored them and did not raise any objection.

"I am the Prophet of God's servant. I will serve his people as long as I am able."

Those who held Ali in high esteem were dismayed by his words. They were ready to lay down their lives for him, but Ali openly expressed his abhorrence for bloodshed. Most of his time was now spent in the study and compilation of the Qur'an. But Ali's greatness was not hidden from anyone. His dignified stance only elevated him further in the eyes of the people. The more he kept himself away from the affairs of the world, the more erudite he became. His

abilities of discernment deepened. Ordinary people who were suffering, developed great respect for him. They came to him with their problems and he tried his best to help them. He advised them, supported them. In the end, his preeminence and generosity turned into the enemy's poison. People were alarmed at his selflessness, his sublime courage and his service to the poor. Ali is close to people's hearts—this reality carried important implications for the future.

The world changed. The children who once roamed in the streets of Medina perched on the Prophet's shoulders went into seclusion. Whatever time Ali had left over from his own studies, he spent on the education and training of his children. They dedicated their days to gaining knowledge and wisdom. They imposed restrictions on themselves, such that none could point a finger at them.

The grief of losing their grandfather had not even subsided when they were faced with a new sorrow. Within a year, their beloved mother left them to go to Allah. The children were devastated. Ali suffered a terrible blow with the departure of his cherished wife. He had loved her deeply and had not looked at another woman as long as she was alive. When he was entrusting her to the earth, he looked at her with tearful eyes and said, "O Rasulullah, your dearest daughter is fortunate for she is coming to you. The esteemed position she held in our hearts, she will have in the other realm as well. No one will ever be able to take her place."

After Fatima Zehra's passing, Ali dedicated himself to raising his children with great love and devotion. He never regarded his daughters, Zainab and Umme Kulsoom, as any less important than his sons. He provided them both with the best education. Whenever he saw Zainab, his heart would fill with sadness because she reminded him

of her mother. At a very young age, Zainab took on the responsibilities and obligations of the family. She cared for her older brothers as their mother would, so that they did not feel her absence acutely. She matured beyond her years very early on. Her brothers loved her more than life itself. She was their younger sister and they never said no to her.

Physically, Zainab resembled her father, but in her temperament and personality she was like her mother. People often referred to her as Zehra the Second. The mother had held her daughter to her breast as she was dying and said, "My daughter, always look after your brothers, I leave them in your care. Even when you are mistress of your own home, don't forget them."

Her mother's words were etched in Zainab's heart and till her last breath she watched over her brothers.

Ali Ibn Abi Talib did a great deal for the rights of the vulnerable and oppressed women of Arabia. He was not a head of state, nor did he have any control over the laws of the land, but even then, women who were suffering came to him with their grievances. This was why he provided his daughters with the same education as his sons, at a time when girls were generally deprived of such advantages. Zainab made the most of this unique opportunity. She regarded her father as the pride of humanity. She hung onto his every word. After her mother died, under her father's supervision, she closely examined the values of life. Ali would gather his children around him and engage in serious conversation with them.

"When the rewards of the world beckon me, I reject them. I say to the world: 'Get away from me! Go somewhere else... I have freed myself from your clutches. I have

protected my steps from the stumbling blocks you have laid out for me. Tell me, where are all those people today who got caught in your web of luxury and extravagance, who were enticed by your trappings? Look, they are buried in their grave, one with dust. O world, if you had a body and if I could hold onto you, I would inflict great punishments upon you. Sadly, you have ensnared so many gullible people with the lure of false desires and diminished them. How many emperors have lost their crown because of you, O deceitful world! Anyone who sets foot upon your slippery surface falls; anyone who rides your waves, drowns. The one who can manage to escape your clutches is very fortunate. O world, you are but a moment, about to end soon.”

The children would listen to him in rapt attention. They were reminded of their grandfather. What a simple man their father was. He would sit on the floor with his slaves and eat with them, he repaired his own shoes, sewed patches on his shirt, and would ride a donkey without a saddle. Baba’s words were their guide.

But it’s human nature to envy a selfless and generous man. Instead of deriving wisdom from what he was saying, there were some who doubted him and tried to undermine him, tried to plant thorns in his way. But despite his bloodied feet, Ali continued to walk on the path of peace and reconciliation. As his children matured, Ali’s stature and respect grew in their eyes. Despite the dry bread and worn-out clothes, whenever they gathered under the stars to listen to Ali Ibn Abi Talib talk about the past, present and future, all of life’s scarcities became bearable. Ali was an exceptional poet. The children would listen to him entranced.

He recited:

Pure is that Being

*Upon whom the measures of the flat earth,
And mountain peaks standing next to each other
From whom the spread of the blackness of the dark night,
And the shadows of the serene evening are not hidden.
Nor the sunset unfolding on the heavens is concealed,
Nor the flashes of thunder,*

*And nor are hidden from the sacred Being the things on
which lightning flashes from among the clouds and disappears.*

*The dark curtains of gloom cannot conceal His piercing
light,*

*Nor the curtains of the dark night have
The strength to disobey His commands,
Nor can the shimmering of the moonlight on the heavens
Be dimmed without His command,
And he knows where the delicate drops of rain will fall,
And where they will gather to form rivers,
And where these tiny ants crawl in rows,
And what the mosquitoes eat,
And what the female carries in her belly.
He is All-Knowing,
Nothing can be hidden from Him.*

The children missed the time when Naana was alive, when they were not bereft of the comfort of their mother's lap, when people came to them like moths to a flame, travelling from faraway places to see them.

Their father was a renowned soldier of Arabia, thought the children, whose sword had distinguished itself throughout the land, who had led magnificent conquests. And here he

was, enduring, without any complaint, the indifference of people and their lack of appreciation.

“Courage and valour are not only about standing up to the enemy in the battlefield. If conflict threatens the land with devastation and destruction, then fortitude is the real courage,” Ali would say. “Thankfully, we are no one’s slaves. We were born free and it is enough to protect this freedom.”

Ali

One can clearly see how, and under what circumstances, the children of Ali Ibn Abi Talib and the grandsons of the Prophet of God reached maturity. Zainab Bint Ali received the same education from her esteemed father as her older brothers. If she had inherited Fatimà Zehra's warmth; her compassion; the ability to make sacrifices; and her patience, fortitude and a love for humanity, then she had also received from Ali Ibn Abi Talib, a legacy of courage, determination and fearlessness along with his qualities of honesty, perseverance, wisdom and the love of learning. When she became a young woman, the fame of her beauty and her intellect spread far and wide. People often referred to her as the "Wise Lady of Arabia".

The years spent with her stepmothers, Ummul Buneen, Asma Bint-e-Umais, and Umamah Bint-e-Zainab were filled with love and affection. They all lived in peace and harmony, and a pleasant atmosphere prevailed at home. Her mothers loved her deeply and also revered her. She reminded everyone of Fatima Zehra. To be generous even in times of scarcity was an art Zainab knew well. Even though she was young, everyone trusted her judgment.

Abdullah Ibn Jafar, a young man from the Hashmi tribe was known to the family. He was the eldest son of the illustrious Hazrat Jafar-e-Tayyar. After observing his qualities in everyday life, Ali Ibn Abi Talib picked him to be his daughter's husband. His forehead shone like the

moon, he resembled the Prophet of God in his appearance and character, and, most importantly, Rasulullah had also admired him greatly and had taken a great deal of interest in his education and training.

After her marriage, Zainab did not feel as if she had gone from one home to another. The atmosphere in her new house was peaceful and calm. Abdullah Ibn Jafar was an honourable man with a dynamic personality. He was an expert in Islamic affairs. He was Ali Ibn Abi Talib's right hand man and as such played an important role in his scholarly projects as well as military matters. He was the protector of family traditions and served cultural and religious causes well. He was known as the "River of Benevolence". But even through she was now married, Zainab's love for her brothers remained constant and she continued taking care of them; she couldn't live without seeing them nearly everyday and also became very fond of their wives and children. Her nephews and nieces were more attached to their aunt than to their own mothers.

Time passed.

After the martyrdom of Hazrat Osman, the third Caliph, there was no other leader in sight except Ali Ibn Abi Talib to take over the reigns of the caliphate. The situation had deteriorated and could no longer be controlled. People approached Ali Ibn Abi Talib in large numbers, asking him to assume command of the caliphate. But he had become so accustomed to seclusion that crowds made him uncomfortable. When demands from the public intensified, he became angry.

"Leave me alone, find someone else. You all are very obstinate, just like a camel without reins. You know I am very rigorous, you will regret appointing me as your leader.

I will not allow you any kind of lenience, you will not get any concessions from me."

"We accept your conditions," the people said, with one voice. But when he continued to refuse, they reproached him, "Ya Ali, don't you see that the caliphate is going through a terrible trial, do you not care about the destruction of Islam? It is your duty to stop this surge of evil."

Still, Ali was reluctant. He knew people could be selfish. They were accustomed to luxury and opulence, their minds had been numbed by materialism, the government was regarded as a means to securing personal gain. The caliphate had been turned into a plaything in the service of pilfering from the national treasury, weakness had dug its claws into the hearts of people. Under these circumstances, altering public consciousness and changing the character of people would be like trying to bend a steel rod. He also wanted to give people time to consider their decision. He didn't want them to later declare that they had made this decision in haste because they were agitated and anxious. He wanted them to believe in him, and felt that their acceptance of him as their leader should come from deep within their hearts.

"O People, listen carefully. If you decide to elect me to be your Imam, I will not be an instrument for you to use as per your wishes. You know me well, you recognise me, you have tested me. I have strict principles. I don't give in to any consideration other than that which is guided by the Qur'an and the Sunnah. If you choose another leader, I will respect your decision like an exemplary citizen. But if you pick me, then remember, I will not encourage anyone's personal interests. I'm very exacting and you have become

used to getting your way. You will not be able to tolerate the rigors I will impose on you."

When they heard his speech Ali's followers were even more enthused. People gathered in multitudes to offer him their support. There was such an onslaught, such a tumultuous charge that it led to utter chaos, with abbayas being ripped, turbans unravelling, shoe laces broken, and women forcing their men to pledge their allegiance to Ali.

But the worst was yet to come. The moment Ali Ibn Abi Talib's term commenced, the Banu Ummayya* raised its head. Their members had become so powerful by this time that they feared no one. Disaster ensued, and Ali did not have a single day of peace.

First, he was accused of Osman Ibn Ghani's† murder. The administrators in Syria had slowly gained in strength and prominence. Soon, they became independent and refused to pledge their allegiance to Ali. When assassins attacked Hazrat Osman, his wife Hazrat Nyla placed her hands over him to save him and her fingers were chopped off. Amir Mu'awiya Ibn Abi Sufiyan hung her fingers and a blood-stained cloak on the pulpit in the mosque. There was public lamenting, followed by fiery speeches, and with promises to avenge the blood of Osman, Amir Mu'awiya took oaths of allegiance in his own name.

In Hijri 37,‡ a battle took place between Ali Ibn Abi Talib and Mu'awiya Ibn Abi Sufiyan in the guise of exacting

* The Banu Ummayya was a clan of the larger Quraysh tribe, which dominated Mecca in the pre-Islamic era.

† Osman Ibn Ghani, the 3rd of the Rashidun Caliphs.

‡ The Hijri era is calculated according to the Islamic lunar calendar. It begins on the first day of Muharram, which occurred in 622 CE.

retribution for Osman's killing. Thus, the seed of discord was sown for the first time between Muslims. Ali Ibn Abi Talib became very worried. He said:

"How unfortunate that the world has opened its jaws like a bloody beast,
 The camel of evil that had been cowering, is now braying.
 People are now the companions of wickedness and depravity,
 All relationships have been destroyed,
 The son is no longer the light of his father's eyes, he is dust,
 The shelter provided by the father is raining fire,
 The treacherous are being cared for,
 Righteousness is taking its last breath,
 The ruler has the highest status,
 The middle-class is intoxicated with satiation,
 The poor and the deprived have no recourse,
 Love is merely a noise on the lips,
 Adultery and evil are not flaws,
 Goodness is scorned,
 Those with vision blindly lust after life,
 And those who have ears are deaf,
 Everything is shattered; the fires of battle are raging,
 Islam is ablaze,
 The nation is drifting, like a camel without reins,
 The caretaker has lost his way,
 If we do not open our eyes this she-camel will stumble,
 fall on her face and die."

Ali Ibn Abi Talib's rule as Caliph was a difficult time for him. The Islamic kingdom was so expansive that it was difficult to provide proper administration from one end to the other. In truth, Islam was at the verge of being fragmented.

The kingdom may have become vast, but that did not mean that Islam had strengthened as it spread. Many of

the territories were Muslim in name only. The basic values of equality and fellowship were diminishing; anyone with power could become a leader; the malady of factionalism, with groups working against each other, was common. Under such circumstances only the very shrewd and devious pawn could keep its feet planted firmly on the ground. Conforming to the true teachings of Islam became almost impossible.

In this chaos, Amir Mu'awiya Ibn Abi Sufyan, who was ruling Syria, acquired great power. His star was ascending. He had unlimited wealth that enabled him to build a strong army. Dismissing Islamic values, he advanced the idea of amassing wealth, since personal assets are necessary to nurture sovereignty and despotism.

In every region under his control, Amir Mu'awiya appointed his loyal Muslim governors who were permitted to maintain their own personal army and who soon became the masters of ordinary Muslims. With no one to challenge them, they killed and pillaged at will. They could demand what they wished from the citizens and if they resisted, Amir Mu'awiya's army would arrive to assist them. The only condition they were required to fulfil was pledging allegiance to Amir Mu'awiya as their Caliph and contributing a fixed amount in taxes to his personal treasury.

Consequently, after a few years of looting the public, several very powerful leaders became extremely prosperous, while poverty grew among the people. The elites, once more, sank into the very decadence and vices against which Islam had once fought.

Two caliphates were formed. On the one hand was Ali's democratic government based on Islamic tenets, on the other was Amir Mu'awiya's monarchy. Ali stood by the poor, but Amir Mu'awiya's power and wealth was producing more

successful results. There were excessive privileges for those who sided with Amir, while Ali's supporters were assured of the rewards of after life. Temporal privileges became more important than the promise of rewards in the hereafter.

At Hunain, Muslims stood against each other. Amir Mu'awiya had a massive army; he had great wealth but little loyalty. The army, still mindful of the victories of Ali Ibn Abi Talib was fearful. The ordinary Arab is very superstitious. He is easily overcome by emotion. It was believed that one does not fight with weapons alone, faith and conviction must be on one's side, too. When Amir Mu'awiya saw that his army was suffering from a crisis of faith and trust, he immediately put his political strategy into play. He ordered his soldiers to hoist copies of the Qur'an on their lances, which put a halt to the fighting.

Ali recognised this was a ploy. He said, "This is a ruse undertaken by Amir Mu'awiya. He is initiating a new strategy so that he can give his defeat a new direction."

But this was not a battle between Muslims and kafirs. This was a confrontation between two Muslim groups. Continuation of hostilities after the Qur'an had been raised would be tantamount to a desecration of the holy text. Amir Mu'awiya was aware that Ali and his people would be helpless in the face of this move.

"Amir Mu'awiya is insulting the Qur'an by raising it between us," Ali said, but his followers hesitated. Amir Mu'awiya had cleverly appointed his spies in Ali's camp and even gained the support of some of the most powerful individuals in his army, men who had traded their integrity for money. Indifferent believers were easily deceived. They said, with one voice, that they would rebel if the Qur'an was desecrated. And because ordinary soldiers are not

accustomed to thinking seriously about their decisions they crossed over to the other side.

Ali was forced to concede since he was not the kind of person who killed to punish those who opposed him. And everyone was also certain that he would not avenge this opposition. Ali would overlook this, he would forgive them, but Amir Mu'awiya's wrath knew no bounds. Those who opposed him had to die—a disgraceful and dishonourable death.

It was decided, in accordance with Allah's book, that the opposing parties would each select a representative and a decision made jointly by them would be accepted by all.

Ali wanted Abdullah Ibn Abbas as the arbitrator but the people of Kufa objected to his choice and demanded that Abu Musa Ashari be chosen to represent them. He belonged to the group that had once opposed Ali, but he was a simple man. In contrast, Amir Mu'awiya's representative was extremely shrewd and farsighted. After two meetings, he was able to sway Ashari, and they both 'agreed' that the two leaders should step down from their positions and people on both sides should be asked to choose whomever they wished to be their Caliph.

When the people assembled, Amir Mu'awiya's representative asked Musa Ashari to present his report first.

"I remove Ali Ibn Abi Talib from his position. This is my decision," he said.

"People, you have heard with your own ears that Ali has been removed from his position as the caliph. I, too, support this decision and appoint Amir Mu'awiya Ibn Abu Sufiyan as the Caliph in place of Ali Ibn Abi Talib."

The people were shocked. This was not what they had agreed upon. A new election should have taken place. There

was a breach among Ali's forces. Those who were greedy openly supported Amir Mu'awiya. It became difficult for Ali to control them, but those of a more just and impartial temperament recognised this deceit.

Amir Mu'awiya was an astute ruler, but he also knew that the manner in which he had conducted the battle with Ali was like putting a wooden pan onto the fire; he knew he couldn't continue conducting himself this way. Members of the intellectual classes, those who were prudent and perceptive, still favoured Ali. There were great historians and scholars among them and if they stood up in favour of Ali, the emotional Arab nation would, once again, be ready to back him. Apart from his personal qualities, his relationship with the Prophet of God, and his friendship with him, was a reality that Amir Mu'awiya could not overlook. Ali's existence was a formidable threat to him. It would be impossible to attain complete success while Ali was still around. Also, Amir's style of governance didn't favour the common man. There was real danger that people could rebel against him at any moment.

Ali's murder was the only way out.

The Second Sorrow

Ali Ibn Abi Talib entered the masjid at the time of Anamaaz and saw a tired, weary traveller sleeping soundly on the steps. He woke him up.

“O brother, get up, you will miss your namaaz.”

And his death opened his eyes and looked at him. Ibn Muljim had been wandering for days looking for Ali. Rousing his death from a slumber, Ali took him along for prayers.

When Ali went in, Ibn Muljim attacked him with his dagger and then disappeared. The dagger had been dipped in poison.

For four days Ali struggled, hovering painfully between life and death. He gathered his family and friends around him and spoke about his legacy.

“God is now your protector. Stay together, all of you, and protect each other. Live together, die together. Every living being has to die one day, but your death stands at every corner because you are loved by me, and by the Prophet of God. The enemies of Islam are your enemies, your only protection is unity, with which you can safeguard your life. Today, all of you, the elders, the young and the children, must promise me that there will be no discord in the family. If you have one morsel of food, you will all share it; if you have one blanket everyone will have a right to it. Your only support and legacy is your regard and love for each other. Let harmony and making sacrifices for each other be your way of life. Death follows you, even if you evade it, it will

come. You will not be able to run away from it, because death is the final fate of every living creature, so do not ever sell your conscience. Respect your family, they are the wings that will enable you to fly, they will be the hands and arms with which you can overcome obstacles. Respect and value those who suffer anguish because of their love for the truth, and respect those who do not support you when you commit evil acts."

Then he placed the hands of all his children into those of his eldest son, Hasan. Thereafter, he placed Abul Fazl Abbas's hand in Husain's and said, "Husain, this is your younger brother, I leave him in your care. Consider him your slave and give him everything that I would have, had death not robbed me of the opportunity."

Abul Fazl Abbas's mother started weeping and said, "Maula, has Abbas done something wrong? Why don't you leave him in the care of your heir, your elder son? It is only right that Hasan should be his protector as well."

Ali strained to speak.

"Abbas and Husain will stand by each other. Abbas is closer to Husain. My heart tells me that these two will always need each other." Then he turned to Abbas and said, "Husain is your older brother, but think of him as you think of me. Consider him your master, try to follow in his footsteps, stay with him like his shadow, do not hesitate to sacrifice your life for him."

Her cheeks resting on the face of her dying father, Zainab had been weeping for four days. His every word was etched in her mind and on her heart.

Ali Ibn Abi Talib's condition worsened, but his mind was razor-sharp until the very end. He said, "Do not be disloyal to your grandfather's followers, do not let them

down, do not lead them astray for your own welfare. People are naïve, they are powerless. If they betray you because they do not know any better, or because they fear for their lives, forgive them. Do not doubt them. Try to conquer not their physical being, but their minds and their hearts. You have seen the sorrow and anguish people have given me and I leave this pain and these adversities as my legacy for you. These challenges will only escalate, as ordinary people are becoming confused, forgetting the hereafter and increasingly becoming taken in with the pleasures of life. Their ability to make sound decisions is diminishing, that which is forbidden is becoming permissible, those who are intelligent and wise are trying to save themselves, and the oppressors are joining hands to cause suffering among innocent people. They are sowing the seeds of discord for personal gains, the well of wisdom has dried up and the tongues of the foolish are loose. The wise are in shock and those who espouse evil have become the rulers. Food acquired through ill means has been sanctioned, a bribe is referred to as a 'gift', and alcohol as the juice of the grape. Under these circumstances, only solidarity and unity can save you. Remember that the lamb that is separated from its herd is devoured by the wolf?"

Then, he embraced everyone. His pain and discomfort were intensifying but he held on to restraint.

On the twenty-first of Ramzan of Hijri 40, a great man, an unrivalled orator and philosopher without equal, Islam's towering pillar, departed from this world, leaving behind his grieving and inconsolable family and friends.

For everyone has to return to his Maker.

The Third Sorrow

After Hazrat Ali's martyrdom, Imam Hasan Ibn Ali remained the Caliph for six months only. He found himself caught in the middle of a strange power struggle. People were divided into factions and they seemed intent on using aggression to achieve their goals. The first signs of the deterioration of Islam were becoming evident. To make matters worse, Amir Mu'awiya launched a massive offensive. To avoid violence and bloodshed, Imam Hasan made peace with him. He had agreed to take on the reins of the caliphate at the insistence of the people, but when he saw that Muslims were bent on shedding the blood of their own, he relinquished his position.

Hasan Ibn Ali did not have a massive army nor did he trust the army he had. Also, he did not have great reserves of wealth needed to maintain an army, and didn't possess a well-equipped force either. During Amir Mu'awiya's time, Islam's outward appearance had still not become so repelling as to create a mistrust of his true intentions. Flaws had appeared, but they were well-hidden and could only be detected by the very discerning. There was no way of conveying the political implications to ordinary people. The self-seeking classes exercised control in all spheres. His opponent's armies were so massive and ruthless that they could easily destroy Imam Hasan's force in no time. Engaging with them would be like committing suicide and the responsibility for this massacre would have fallen upon Imam Hasan.

And so, after a few mutually agreed upon conditions there was a cessation of hostilities.

The first condition was that Imam Hasan's supporters would not be punished, their citizenship would not be revoked, that they would be allowed to continue with their lives like any other citizen.

Second, Amir Mu'awiya would hold open elections in accordance with the basic tenets of Islam, and would not appoint an heir.

There were a few other conditions as well and at that time Amir Mu'awiya accepted them all. Later on, he didn't abide by any of them. Supporters of Ali and his sons were picked up one by one and killed, and after some time the process of open elections was also discontinued.

After giving up the caliphate, Hasan Ibn Ali left Kufa and returned to Medina because no one was safe. Although Hasan had given up governance, Amir Mu'awiya was afraid that if he died before Hasan, people would immediately elect him as their Caliph. The control of the caliphate would pass on from the Banu Ummayya into the hands of the Banu Hashim, and his beloved son, Yazid would be deprived of the throne and the crown.

Although the agreement had deeply affected Imam Hasan's popularity and the possibility that people would reach out to him and rally around him ceased to be a real threat, he was, after all, the son of the conqueror of Khyber, the grandson of the the Prophet of God. His existence was an irritant. The gaze of the citizens was still fixed on him. And for this reason he had to be removed from Amir's path.

One of Imam Hasan's wives, Habda was from Kufa. Amir Mu'awiya secretly won her over to his side and promised her that if she succeeded in having Imam Hasan murdered

he would reward her with one thousand dinars and wed her to his son.

Yazid's good looks were well-known. And what woman would not dream of becoming the daughter-in-law of the reigning caliph? Habda was easily duped. She fed Imam Hasan food laced with poison and since he trusted her implicitly he didn't suspect anything. The poison was so potent that he immediately fell ill, vomited blood, and his body turned blue.

A commotion ensued in the household. The entire family assembled. Imam Hasan sent for his younger brother, Husain and said to him, "I've been poisoned many times before, but this time it is deadly. My time has come."

"Brother, tell me, who has poisoned you? Whoever it is will be punished."

"What's done is done. You need proof in order to punish and I do not have any proof. This murderer is merely an instrument, we cannot touch the real murderer. Let's put an end to this matter here and now. Otherwise the situation will become more complicated. You will endanger your life, many innocent people will be imprisoned, only the guilty will go free. At this moment, all I want is to have the honour of being buried next to Naana Jaan. You get permission. But if the people oppose it, in Allah's name, don't create a disturbance on my account. Husain, we are caught in a whirlpool, and the first sign of resistance on our part will result in the death of innocent men. Bury me in Jannat ul Baqih in that case, but make sure dissent does not raise its head."

Imam Hasan suffered for four more days and on the twenty-eighth of Safar of Hijri 49, he passed away. At the

time of his death he was forty-six or forty-seven years old. Husain began making preparations to bury his brother next to Naana Jaan as his brother had willed. But just as they had feared, there was opposition. Imam Husain was forced to bury his brother in Jannat ul Baqih. The Prophet of God had been gone less than forty years and his grandsons were denied the opportunity to be buried in accordance to their wishes. Imam Hasan's family honoured his second request in order to avoid bloodshed and quietly tolerated this insult from the people.

Amir Mu'awiya was happy. Celebrations commenced in Syria. After Hasan, some people accepted Husain as their Caliph and he began to fight the difficulties of a new era with great courage and valour. Already, the wealthy and elite were avoiding him. Soon, even ordinary citizens were reluctant to get too close to him. There were spies everywhere. Anyone found making attempts to support Husain in any way was arrested on trumped up charges. Government squads patrolled the city, arrested people randomly and gave out punishment as they saw fit. People had no legal recourse; afraid for their lives, they retreated from public life.

When oppression gains strength, there is a sense of unease and fear among people. They become weak and cower in the face of brutal power. Those who are perceptive and honourable leave to settle down in other lands and spend their lives in anonymity and seclusion. They lose their lives if they don't.

If this was the condition of Muslims, what could one say about the Jews and Christians? Their rights were openly taken away in the name of Islam. Their cases could not be heard in the courts, their lands were confiscated and handed

over to informers. Those who couldn't go into exile were forced to stay in hiding. They could not walk tall or live with their heads held high.

The Christians and Jews brought their complaints to Imam Husain and he helped them as much as he could, offered them consolation and hope. Since his enemies were furious that people still had the audacity to show their love and respect for him, his followers came to see Imam Husain in the dark of night.

Troublemakers started spreading the rumour that Imam Husain had become a non-believer, that he was unusually friendly with the Christians and Jews, that he met with them secretly at night and was inciting them, and sowing the seeds of rebellion against the ruler of the day, the caliph of the Muslims. But Husain did not respond to these allegations. He knew that after his older brother, it was his turn to be targetted. He was not going to give his enemies an opportunity to go after him, he had to safeguard himself and his family. He became a recluse, spent most of his time studying and educating children. The entire family was like a tightly closed fist. He didn't venture out alone, and everyone formed a protective cover around him when he stepped out. There were well-wishers who came from far and wide to protect him. No assassin dared to harm Husain.

Amir Mu'awiya didn't want to attack him openly because people still held him in high regard; there was no way to taint his character. In private, people did not hesitate to accuse Amir Mu'awiya of being Imam Hasan's killer. But he was a seasoned politician and had much experience in such matters.

Husain Ibn Ali's family belonged to a strong tribe whose members were always alert. Every day, Imam Husain gathered them to discuss the latest situation. Sometimes they suffered hardship; there were days when there was not enough to eat, but no one ever saw a frown cloud Imam Husain's forehead. Time passed. Years went by.

Mirage

Amir Mu'awiya had a strange kind of love for his son, Yazid. He was a product of the passions of middle age and his mother had been Amir's greatest weakness. She was a young woman who had suddenly entered his life. Once, while he was camped in the desert during the course of his many travels, he happened to come across a caravan of gypsies. Feeling a little weary, he came out of his tent and saw a few young women splashing about in the stream nearby. One of them was exceedingly beautiful, graceful and very young. He felt as if he had been hit by lightning. At that time, Amir was not the emperor, but his appearance and demeanor were like one. He possessed a flamboyant temperament. The moment he saw her he fell madly in love. He discovered that she was the favourite daughter of the leader of the gypsy tribe. He immediately sent for the father, had him seated next to him and during the course of a casual conversation a deal was quickly made. Bags of gold coins were emptied out in front of him and Amir had a nikah performed with this girl.

He brought her back home with him and had a very grand palace built for her. Hundreds of handmaidens were assigned to her service. Exquisite gold-embroidered garments and precious jewels were ordered from faraway lands and placed at her feet. The palace was decorated like the magical abode of fairies. Everyday, fresh fruits and flowers were delivered on camels for her. All kinds of exotic foods were served to her on gold and silver platters.

But she was a strange girl.

She sat like a stone statue, staring into space, as if she was searching for something. She would gaze into the horizon and sigh deeply. Then tears, like strings of pearls, would flow from her eyes. She hated the jewels and the gold; she ripped up the garments made of silk and brocade and the sight of platters filled with rich foods made her sick.

One day, a handmaiden asked her, "My good queen, what ails you?"

She remained silent.

"Princess, what do you want?"

"Nothing," she answered dejectedly.

"Then why are you always so sad?"

"I don't know."

"This grand palace..."

"...is a golden cage."

"These silk and brocade garments, these jewels..."

"They are the golden chains which shackle me."

"Dear Princess, these flowers and fruits that are specially brought for you from faraway lands?"

"Sweeter are the berries from my woods. When the fragrance of jasmine bushes fills the air, the deer become intoxicated with the scent."

"You scoff at your blessings, Princess! The delicacies here, of such variety..."

"The bread my mother bakes, which we ate with a piece of cheese, is more delicious. You've never tasted the cheese my mother makes. I feel stifled here... ahhh, those open meadows, the shimmering waterfalls, the green groves, the tall, swinging date trees..."

"My Queen, did you not see the chandelier that has been brought specially for your bedroom?"

"Ahh that tent made of coarse leather! If someone has been able to get some oil or grease, my mother would have just lit a lamp now... maybe she's thinking of me at this moment."

"But, my Queen, you are so dear to the Master, he loves you passionately."

"Your Master, the old scoundrel, has bought me with a bag of gold coins, but my heart can't be bought. My heart is not mine anyway. During the spring festival last year, I fell in love with a handsome young man who embodies the magnificence and vigour of my tribe. When that lean, graceful sorcerer with dreamy eyes plays the *uud*, the hearts of young virgins burst into song, their lips tremble and every pore of their being dances."

"Oh no, my Queen, God has given you everything and..."

"God has punished me."

This handmaiden, motivated by greed for a generous reward went to Mu'awiya and told him everything.

"The wretch, the ungrateful beggar-woman, she dares to call me a scoundrel." He was livid. His first impulse was to twist her neck that very instant. But she was his wife, his beloved, and he yearned to win her over. The thought of spilling her blood was so painful it made him feel he was being slaughtered. His heart melted, his emotions flowed from his eyes in the form of tears.

He sent her back to her parents on the condition that until she begged for his forgiveness she would be left there to rot. At that time, she was pregnant with Yazid.

The thought of home breathed new life into her. But when she got there, she saw that everything had changed. Her tribe had been resettled grandly. People lived in brick homes; her father, their leader, had an imposing palace and

his own army that collected taxes from the neighbouring regions. He was now a powerful and civilised plunderer whose influence went as far as the royal court. His many brothers, too, had been appointed as rulers in other regions, their palaces teeming with slaves. The aromas of rich, buttery foods and the odour of alcohol numbed her brain. Her handsome and charming beloved, whose soulful *uud* had once stirred her heart, had turned into a lecherous profligate. His body was covered in layers of fat, and because he drank excessively, his once dreamy eyes remained bloodshot, like red embers. Even so, she sat at the window of her father's palace—the one that he had built with the money he had received from her sale—looking out into the far distance, searching for her lost home, the one where she had stepped from her childhood into youth. In the end, the young woman lost her life while giving birth to Yazid and disappeared into the realm of her dreams.

Amir was deeply aggrieved when he received news of her death. That weak but stubborn girl had won. He had lost. When Yazid turned two, he sent for him and began raising him with great love and affection.

Yazid was very good looking, but extremely hot tempered and obstinate. Amir loved his son passionately and lavished wealth on him without restraint. Eventually, his undue indulgence and attention turned Yazid into an insolent and arrogant young man. Once a year, Yazid visited his mother's tribe and stayed there for a few months and it was there that his newly-rich relatives encouraged him to take up vulgar and lascivious ways. He started writing poems on beauty and adulation from an early age and his verses embodied his thoughts on intoxication and the uninhibited passions

of youth. As he grew older, he also became very fond of travelling and hunting.

The memory of the young, newly-blossomed maiden, whom he had been unable to win over and who had escaped his golden cage, still rankled in Amir Mu'awiya's heart. He probably harboured deep emotional insecurity, because he was afraid that, like his mother, his son would also become disappointed with him and leave. So he did everything in his power to place the world at Yazid's feet. Had Amir undertaken for himself the kind of efforts he made for this son, and the scheming he engaged in for his sake, he would have been among the great names of this world and regarded as a highly revered public figure.

People were aware that he adored his son. So, some of his sycophantic advisors casually suggested that he declare Yazid as his heir in his lifetime, so as to avoid bloodshed later on. His problems would thus be easily resolved, he was told.

Amir Mu'awiya approved of their 'advice'. Several of his friends incited him further by saying that since it was clear that after him only Yazid was capable of taking on the responsibilities of the caliphate, he should exercise his power and influence and name Yazid as his successor. And why would Yazid oppose this decision? He immediately began putting pressure on his father. Persuading the people of Syria to do his bidding wasn't difficult; they were already obedient citizens. They had, by this time, entrusted their faith in Amir and accepted him as their caliph appointed by God. It was easy to obtain their vows of allegiance.

Preparations began in full swing. A general meeting was called, where those in high-ranking positions proposed the idea of announcing Yazid as the heir in such a way that it would seem as if the people had come up with this plan on

their own. They said, "Amir Mu'awiya Ibn Abu Sufyan is so immersed in serving God's people that he has little time to think about the future of Islam. After him, this system that he has so painstakingly set up will fall apart, there will be bloodshed. The selfish masses will get caught up in struggling for their own rights, a storm will break out which the innocent and peace-loving citizens of the Arab nation will have to endure. Therefore, Amir should appoint his talented and learned son as his heir, so that there are no useless disagreements afterwards. This is crucial for the propagation and welfare of Islam and the Arab nation."

Those who were supportive of this plan had already been appointed to high positions. They also suggested that perhaps Amir should show some hesitation in accepting this proposal so that it would appear as if he had been forced into giving his consent for the sake of Islam.

Amir Mu'awiya immediately agreed to being 'forced'. In his opinion, Islamic democracy demanded that imperial rule be strengthened. And thus the process of obtaining the oath of allegiance started without delay. Those who expressed even the slightest objection were bribed with gold; those who happily agreed were richly rewarded. People felt it was safer to go along with Amir Mu'awiya rather than oppose him.

After securing Syria, Amir Mu'awiya took his campaign further. There was some opposition in Kufa but those who dared to resist were rounded up on false charges and mercilessly crushed. Others either disappeared or bowed down to Amir Mu'awiya's command and accepted Yazid as the heir.

But Amir was very worried about Medina and Mecca. Marwan, the ruler of Medina, was assigned the task of obtaining support for Yazid from his people. When Marwan

took this proposal to the people, they did not express their opposition openly and instead evaded the issue. The doors of the treasury were opened wide. There were some who took the money, but later on, after they had discussed the matter amongst themselves, they returned it. They objected by stating that taking this step would be sacrilegious. No Caliph had appointed his son as the heir. It was an open defiance of Islam's basic tenets, it was a custom associated with imperial rule, against which Islam had raised its voice, and after destroying it, had established democracy. Hearing all this, Amir Mu'awiya remained silent. He did not wish to openly oppose public opinion. He knew that the Arab nation was emotional, and, given the slightest reason, would stubbornly hold on to its stand. Moreover, he had complete faith in his own intelligence and political acumen.

For him, the greatest threat was Husain Ibn Ali. He was the grandson of the Prophet of God and a highly respected, honourable and exemplary individual in his own right.

After the martyrdom of Imam Hasan, Husain Ibn Ali was left alone at the mercy of Amir Mu'awiya's tactics. Amir was a seasoned politician. He didn't want to attack Husain soon after the assassination of his older brother. The situation would become very awkward and also quite transparent. Amir was accustomed to administering poison one drop at a time.

First, he shrewdly tried to erase the memory of Ali Ibn Abi Talib's great personality from the minds of the people. By assassinating him Amir had wiped out his physical presence but Ali Ibn Abi Talib continued to rule people's hearts. They were still awed by his greatness. Amir had to destroy Ali's eminence in order to become an important figure himself. So he forbade the use of Ali's name in the *khutbah*, the

sermons, and instead ordered that Hazrat Osman's superior qualities be exalted. It was not because Amir Mu'awiya had a special regard or affection for Hazrat Osman. He knew that if he presented himself in Ali's place, people would doubt his intentions and accuse him of being selfish and self-serving. So, very cleverly he gave careful instructions for creating such hadiths, or accounts, highlighting Hazrat Osman's eminence. Ali's mention was altogether omitted.

During this time, people earned thousands by making up new hadiths, and then they went a step further: instead of simply ignoring Ali, they began describing his flaws to discredit him. They didn't even refrain from directly maligning his name. Those who protested were punished in the most severe manner. This is how Ali Ibn Abi Talib's character momentarily lost its lustre.

The lust for power and supremacy turns a person into an animal. God knows what drives someone to set such a goal and then blindly push towards fulfilling it, trampling anyone who comes in the way. It is impossible to gauge the extent to which people have suffered violence at the hands of men motivated by the greed for power and a need for control. Even the mere thought of such injustice makes humanity hang its head in shame. When tyranny is at its peak, no one has the courage to stand up to it. Sometimes, inertia comes in the way and people continue to suffer in silence. A neighbour is beheaded, a house is set on fire, children are burnt alive, innocent girls are raped. Yet, people simply lock their doors and hide in fear thanking the Almighty that they escaped these atrocities. They do not have the courage to either see or hear what is really going on. And so the tyrant becomes more brazen. Every step takes him closer to the extreme, he slowly becomes

stone-hearted—even the most inhuman act of violence no longer affects him and he sees his actions as not only justified but necessary for his personal good.

During Amir Mu'awiya's reign, the forgotten and barbarous punishments of the time of the Jahaliya were revived. The ideas and acts that Islam had criticised and forbidden became acceptable once again: peel the skin off of a living person and fry it in oil; pull out a person's tongue; chop off every part of the body, one by one, so that the person dies a slow and agonising death. And these brutal acts were carried out in the public square so that people would learn their lesson, become insensitive, emotionally scarred, psychologically passive, and so terrified that they would eventually be ready to engage in this savage behaviour just to save their lives. Their hearts would become so cold and unfeeling that a father would not mourn for his son, a brother would slit his brother's throat, and people would obey commands like puppets.

Since the majority in Kufa loved Ali, they suffered the most aggression. They had no strength left to take a stand. They were afraid to leave their homes, afraid of talking openly in the presence of their slaves and handmaids because they were worried that they would tell on them. Spying had become a very popular profession. Every bit of information, true or false, could be sold for a price. The purpose of all this was to eliminate certain people. Seeing atrocities being committed on false testimony seemed to put people under a spell—they lost their sense of reasoning and no longer had any faith in themselves.

Those who were marked for murder were scholars and intellectuals, men trusted by the public, men whose actions

and speech they had faith in, who had refused to put a price on their principles. They were slain so that people would be deprived of the leadership of these great men and would turn into mindless sheep. Wise and learned men are very dangerous. They expose the reality of a fascist system for everyone to see.

It was strange that Husain Ibn Ali's family was still untouched by the flames leaping out from this blaze. But they were not ignorant of what was going on and were extremely cautious. Everyone who was going in and out of Husain Ibn Ali's house was closely watched and anyone who developed a close association with him suddenly disappeared. Although he was aware of everything, Husain said nothing because he was in shock. The people accused him of being passive, he listened to them silently, without reproach.

He had seen so much after the passing of the Prophet of God. He knew that the majority was oppressed, the sword was in the hands of a few and taking a stand against this small group would be akin to committing suicide. Power is blind, the majority is helpless, and those in power are always looking for an excuse to destroy those who pose any kind of threat to them.

Amir Mu'awiya wished that Husain would do something that would give him a pretext to destroy his whole family. If only he and his relatives and friends would retaliate, then they all would be trampled and crushed. Amir was extremely distressed by Husain's silence. He tried his best to convince Abul Fazl Abbas to come over to his side. He sent him messages: "Why are you hiding, take over the governorship of one of the districts. Islam's ship is caught in a whirlpool, come and take control of the oars."

But Abbas refused to leave Husain's side.

Next, Ali Akbar was summoned, showered with praise and offered all kinds of inducements. If he abandoned his father and came over to Amir Mu'awiya's camp, Yazid's position would become strong. Ali Akbar was a spitting image of Rasulullah; he was young but extremely brave and mature. His equestrian skills and swordsmanship were exemplary.

"The lamb that strays away from its herd will be devoured by the wolf"—Ali Akbar had absolute faith in his grandfather's teachings. "Unity is your last weapon," he had said. The education that Husain had imparted to his children was very thorough. No power in the world could lead them astray, they refused to let go of each other's hand.

Amir Mu'awiya was consumed by his plan of declaring Yazid his heir. The propaganda machine was working in full force. Yazid truly believed he was the rightful heir. After all, he had unlimited wealth, he was strikingly handsome, he had an eye for the finest clothes, loved making new discoveries, and was able to create such remarkable images of passion and beauty with his poetry that left his listeners spellbound. He was fond of hunting and had acquired dozens of dogs of superior breed from across Europe. He loved alcohol and women. His palace was a picture of splendour and luxury representing different parts of the world. Indulging his son's fancies, Amir had acquired extraordinary artifacts from far and wide for him.

The entertainment at Yazid's palace was often vulgar and obscene. At the centre of the palace was a pool made from Italian marble, filled with a variety of alcohol. Naked women frolicked in it, playfully offering goblets of wine to guests. Yazid penned graphic verses about a beauty drenched in wine, which drove his listeners wild with passion.

Amir Mu'awiya continued with his efforts. When Yazid was leaving for Hajj that year, he sent along gold coins with him so that he could bribe people over to his side. This produced the desired results. Stories about Yazid's flamboyance and generosity spread everywhere. Those who were discerning and insightful were dumbfounded at this phase that Islam was passing through.

But the group that rankled in Amir's eyes stood in his way again. When the people who had been bribed reflected on the real reasons behind the generosity exhibited by Yazid, word travelled quickly. It was said that people even threw away the gold coins because... "our conscience is not for sale." Amir Mu'awiya was furious, but he was accustomed to proceeding with caution.

In his book *Mein Kampf*, Hitler has written that if a drop of water falls on a stone continuously, over a long period of time, eventually there will be a dent in the stone. If something, no matter how absurd it may be, is repeated constantly, then the ears get accustomed to hearing it; innocent hearts are won over, lies and deceit turn into the greatest truths of all. Yazid's mission was not altogether a failure; at least a seed was sown. Now, the question was how to nurture it. Marwan organised a large meeting in Medina and addressed the crowds: "People! Amir Mu'awiya is very old now. He wishes to appoint a suitable and learned man as his heir in his lifetime, so that God and His virtuous individuals may continue to be served on a grand scale. Don't waste time in seeking an oath of allegiance. People need to be saved from catastrophe. Those seeking personal gains cannot be allowed to raise their heads, public peace shouldn't fall prey to violence and bloodshed. A learned, merciful man should be chosen as the heir, one who walks in the footsteps

of the first four just Caliphs* and who will elevate Islam to greater heights. There is only one such exemplary man, I'm talking about Amir Mu'awiya's virtuous and exceptional son, Yazid Ibn Mu'awiya. I'm sure you all will agree with me."

People had seen the fate of those who had refused to "agree", and so they averted their eyes and said nothing. But Abdul Rahman Ibn Abu Bakr, the first Caliph's son and Hazrat Ayesha's[†] brother, couldn't remain silent. He was furious and said angrily, "Marwan! Fear God and the fires of Hell! You are the worst liar and your master is one step ahead of you. Yazid is a vile and contemptible man, who has no other interests besides carousing, indulging in merrymaking, and drinking alcohol. He recites sinful verses and is a hypocrite and a fornicator."

Marwan said, "This is all gossip spread by Yazid's enemies to discredit him. They are false accusations!"

"You base, ignoble man! Do you think I'm someone who invents accusations? You vile man! How dare you question my intentions?" Saying this, he grabbed Marwan's leg and dragged him down from the pulpit.

"O enemy of Islam, you are not fit to sit on this pulpit."

A commotion ensued. Amir's soldiers surrounded Abdul Rahman and drew their swords dipped in poison to kill him. When Ummul Momineen Hazrat Ayesha received the news, she immediately rushed to the scene and challenged Marwan.

* The first four Caliphs after the death of the Prophet Muhammad, were Abu Bakr, Umar Ibn al-Khattab, Usman Ibn Affan, Ali Ibn Abi Talib.

† Hazrat Ayesha was Abu Bakr's daughter and one of the wives of Prophet Muhammad.

“O shameful and despicable man! You have the impudence to raise your hand to attack my brother? Remember, the Prophet of God cursed you many times.”

Hazrat Ayesha's followers were everywhere. They became enraged. Marwan quickly stepped away from the pulpit and immediately sent Amir Mu'awiya a message: There are some people here from Hijaz and Iraq who are creating problems for us. I've discovered that they are on very good terms with Husain Ibn Ali. These people are our enemies and when the time comes they will betray us.

This is what Amir Mu'awiya had feared. The presence of Rasulullah's family posed the greatest threat to him. Although he was unable to connect Husain with this disturbance, he knew that the rebellious *spirit** of the citizens of Medina existed because of him. As long as Husain was alive, this spirit of rebellion would remain alive. He penned Husain a long letter:

There can only be one reason for the uprisings against the government. It is your false belief that you are the rightful heir to the caliphate. I understand the meaning of these conspiracies. You would do well to banish this foolish thought from your heart. Try to pay heed to Hasan Ibn Ali's promise. If you oppose my laws, then you should not expect any leniency from me. I know how to protect myself. If you try to make a fool of me, you will regret it. You will not gain anything. There will be discord among Muslims for no good reason. People will be incited to shed blood, the community of the Prophet and the cause of Islam will suffer. You are also putting your own life in danger. I won't be held responsible if anything happens to you.

* Italicised English words are the ones that appear in English in the original text.

Husain Ibn Ali read this letter carefully. He consulted with his friends and relatives. Taking everyone's opinion into account, he formulated this reply:

Whatever you claim you have heard about me appears to be a product of your sick mind. Perhaps your own guilty conscience is compelling you to make these baseless remarks. You want to place the blame for the failure of Marwan's scheme, which was actually yours, on me, when the truth is that it has not even the remotest connection with me.

Your attitude cannot be acceptable to any rational person. You want to believe that the Arab nation is with you, although you know very well that the secret of your 'popularity' is the large army that you have carefully and painstakingly raised with your riches. But your armies do not prove that you are on the right path and that you have the confidence of the people.

Your hands are soiled with the blood of some of the most revered scholars in the land. You have destroyed everyone who has raised a voice against you. You broke all your agreements, forgot all your promises, and murdered innocent people by subjecting them to the most atrocious punishments. You had their limbs chopped off and turned them blind with steel rods, you have martyred entire families.

Despite this, there are people, and they exist in large numbers, who prefer a physical death rather than a spiritual one. You are hiding your greed for power under the guise of strengthening Islam. The dominant position you have attained has nothing to do with people's freedom to elect their leader. You have obtained the caliphate through political maneuvers and manipulations and now, labelling this caliphate as your legitimate reward, you are dreaming of leaving it to your son. You boast about promoting Islam, although you have left no stone unturned in sullying and corrupting it.

Mu'awiya, God sees everything. The Arab nation is also not blind. You are determined to use sinister political moves

to make your son, who does not even deserve to be called a human being, your heir. There is no fear in your heart as you insult Islam. You are heading down the wrong path, and not doing anything to stop you, allowing you to have your way is to betray Islam and commit a great sin.

When Mu'awiya received this letter he flew into a mad rage. He had no other recourse but to travel to Medina himself, explain the intricacies of the situation to the people, and use whatever means possible to bring Husain Ibn Ali over to his side, since it was he who was their most respected leader and guide. If Husain could somehow be subjugated, no one would refute Yazid's right to be the heir.

Amir arrived in Medina with great pomp and show, grand banquets were arranged and special guests were invited. During a conversation, someone casually mentioned the idea of Yazid inheriting the caliphate and immediately another followed by singing his praises. No one disputed the claim since there seemed little point in getting into trouble. Husain Ibn Ali pretended not to hear any of this. No one had the audacity to ask him for his opinion on this matter and he did not find it necessary to share his thoughts with his host. The issue was passed over.

But just to be on the safe side, Husain left for Mecca with his family after that incident.

The coast was now clear. There had been some foot-dragging in the presence of Husain and his like-minded companions, but with them gone, banquets were held openly and large gatherings were organised, where Yazid's merits and virtues were extolled. It was explained that whatever the Caliph was doing was in keeping with the commands of God and the Prophet. This decision was irrevocable and anyone who stood against Yazid's right to be the heir would

be regarded as an enemy of Islam. Their actions would be the equivalent to opposing Allah and the Prophet's commands. The harshest means would be employed to bring him to the right path, or else Islam would be in danger of complete annihilation. They declared that the responsibility of the bloodshed that ensued would fall on those who were avaricious and selfish and intent on creating conflicts for their own personal gain, and who regarded themselves as the rightful heirs to the caliphate.

So often were these pronouncements and statements repeated at public gatherings and meetings that those who were naive and unworldly started feeling guilty and foresaw a grim afterlife if they even thought of challenging the order. But there were many who, although they felt threatened by Amir Mu'awiya's fearsome and terrorising words, secretly became even more skeptical and distrustful of him. They simply deferred on the question of Yazid's right to be heir and quietly disappeared. They neither opposed him openly nor did they promise allegiance. Amir was furious at this clever strategy but he could not say anything.

He met Abdullah Ibn Abbas very warmly and spoke in a conciliatory manner. He reminded him of his many favours and tried to convince him to give up his involvement with Husain Ibn Ali. Why jeopardise your future, he said. Husain's fate is clear. "If his father, Ali Ibn Abi Talib couldn't win against me, what chance does he have? If he clashes with me, he will be crushed."

Abdullah Ibn Abbas listened carefully and then said, "Husain is his father, Ali Ibn Abi Talib's true heir. If you want proof then hold free and open elections. I'm sure he will be elected and your son will lose. How can you compare him to Husain? O Amir, do not create trouble for Husain, he is

the only closest relative of the Prophet left now. People truly believe in his preeminence and he will perform his duties most effectively. Your careless, self-indulgent son cannot measure up to him."

This bold opposition, although honest, made Amir livid. But being a shrewd politician, he said very politely, "It's possible that there is some truth in what you say, but Yazid has a large number of supporters in Syria, and those who are powerful will even disobey my command. The majority there now endorses Yazid's right to be the heir. If Husain tries to remind people of his right, there will be violence. My supporters will create rivers of blood. You have no idea how much people love Yazid. He is immensely popular among young men, even more than I am, and if they decide to take up arms then Muslims will shed the blood of their brothers."

"Bloodshed should be avoided at all cost." Abdullah Ibn Abbas was blind and lived in seclusion. He was deeply disturbed by the thought of bloodshed.

Amir Mu'awiya, who didn't think much of Abdullah, took his silence for consent and did not insist that he accept Yazid as the heir. The people of Medina endured Amir Mu'awiya's onslaught without any one to steer them in the right direction, and so, eventually, just to get him off their back, they agreed to his demand.

After this triumph in Medina, Amir headed to Mecca. Husain Ibn Ali and Abdullah Ibn Abu Bakr were offered honours and sent gifts that were returned graciously. Amir Mu'awiya ignored this insult and expressed a desire to talk to them in person.

Everyone was curious about this meeting. What will they discuss? What will they decide? There were all kinds

of conjectures. What will Husain decide? If an agreement is reached, what will be the conditions?

When Husain Ibn Ali received the invitation, there was uproar in his family. Everyone gathered to discuss whether it would be wise for him to go alone?

“I’m only going to meet the man; I’m not going into a lion or tiger’s den.” He said this especially for Abul Fazl Abbas’s benefit.

Abbas had not overlooked his father’s last wish even for a single moment. When he was on his death-bed, suffering for four days after having been stabbed with a poisoned sword, Ali Ibn Abi Talib had entrusted him to Husain’s care, but he had also instructed Abul Fazl Abbas to protect Husain. Abbas was an exemplary horseman and an expert swordsman. He had secretly organised a band of young men who were among Arabia’s best warriors. The public acknowledged their strengths. Along with Abbas, these courageous men had vowed to protect Husain. Under Abbas’s leadership they provided him protection without his knowledge. Whenever Husain left the house they walked stealthily behind him at a distance. When he was in the mosque, they remained close by, armed and alert. It was fear of these young men that prevented assailants from going after Husain. Although Husain had some inkling of the existence of this group of soldiers, and he had tried to get information about them from Abbas, the devoted brother had not said a word.

“My brother, I’m not a king who needs an armed guard for his protection. And whom do I have to fear? Everyone around me is my own,” Husain said.

But Abbas never gave him an explanation nor did he argue. He was driven by a special belief upon which he acted.

Husain went alone to meet Amir Mu'awiya. He was greeted with warmth. The conversation began casually. Then silence came between them. Amir said politely, "If you promise to listen to me calmly, there is something I want to say."

"I'm listening."

"Respectable and important leaders of the Muslim world are insisting that I talk to all Muslims about the question of Yazid's right to be my successor. I have been ignoring them until now, but the pressure is mounting. They all admire Yazid, in their eyes there is no one better than him."

"And in your eyes?" the Imam asked, with a smile.

"I can't help but think like them. As God is my witness, I don't see anyone more capable than Yazid."

"If you cannot see anyone better than your own son, then the fault lies in your vision."

Amir Mu'awiya felt anger stir within him, but he forced a smile.

"Well, then you tell me, who is better than him?"

"Do not wait for me to give you an answer. Hold free elections and everyone will find out whether or not there is anyone better than your son."

"I understand. You are referring to yourself."

"And if I am, there is nothing strange in it. I will be able to serve the nation better. But why are you afraid? The people's decision will be the most appropriate."

"The public is illiterate and foolish. They don't understand the finer aspects of politics. I know you are virtuous and disciplined, but Islam is going through a phase where instead of a virtuous, God-loving leader, there is need for a forceful, strict and well-liked ruler with expert knowledge in the affairs of the government, someone whom the people

will listen to and obey. Yazid is very popular and people are in awe of him."

"In other words, he can be an oppressive and cruel ruler whose name will strike fear into the hearts of the people, whose every glance will bring them the message of death and whose brutality and tyranny are without match. There is no doubt Amir that both you and your son possess these qualities. Your dominance has turned into terror. And as for the problems that exist today and the question of Islam passing through a delicate time, it is all your doing."

"This is an accusation!!"

"Amir, this is the truth. You have sown the seeds of control and supremacy in Islam once again, suppressed Islamic unity and appointed tyrannical and bloodthirsty administrators to rule over common people. It is not Islam's future you are worried about, you want to protect your administrators. That is why you maintain such large armies because otherwise people would trample them. In the safety of these officials is your safety as well. You are afraid of virtuous, upright people. If the caliphate passes into the hands of a good, respectable, merciful man, these officials will not be able to do as they please, they would have to answer for their actions. But you and your administrators are not ready for any kind of accountability."

"Ya Husain, what are you saying? All my officials are benevolent, just, and merciful. Serving people is their only purpose in life."

Husain was a serious man, he was neither in the habit of laughing loudly nor had circumstances allowed him to do so, but at this moment he could not restrain himself and broke into a laugh.

“By God, Mu’awiya, you are an interesting man. You have surrounded yourself with clowns and, in their company you, too, have become a spectacle. Do you really believe that your administrators are merciful, or is it that you don’t know anything? By God, either way it is the ordinary man’s misfortune. You don’t know what they are doing. Are they deceiving you or are you covering up their crimes? What is so obvious to everyone is hidden from you? If you are so foolish and ignorant then you are not worthy of the caliphate. Go and ask a little boy and he will be able to tell you that those working for you, your close friends, companions and relatives are the worst administrators in the world. They are draining the blood of helpless and defenseless people and using it to strengthen the foundations of their palaces. Revelry, drinking and womanising—these are their only activities. The men serving under you know the secret of your son’s dissolute behaviour. Your crown and your throne glorify these men who have forced you to become a merciless Pharaoh, a ruler who is trampling the principles of Islam under his feet.”

Amir Mu’awiya face turned blue, his eyes blazed with fury, his throat became constricted with rage as he said, “Husain Ibn Ali! you are attacking the Amirul Momineen, the Caliph. You forget your place.”

“I am unable to regard such a man as Amirul Momineen, someone who is deliberately pushing Islam toward destruction. You are extremely irresponsible, and your son is far worse. When people hear stories of his immoral acts, they stick their fingers into their ears to block out the sound.”

“Is your opinion of Yazid so low?”

“Whatever I have said is the truth.”

"But he always praises you."

"He is also speaking the truth." Husain smiled.

Amir was irritated, but said politely, "Husain, we are not strangers to each other, we are related. Yazid is like your younger brother. Why don't you let him become the Caliph in name only. Keep the power in your own hands, and Yazid will not disobey your commands."

"What good will such a hollow caliphate do for your son?"

"He's being stubborn."

"Amir, the caliphate is not a clay toy that you can hand over to a stubborn, cantankerous child just to appease him. You want me to hoodwink people by showing my loving support for your son. You want those who trust me to think of him as my son and cover up his faults, or more accurately, honour him. Mu'awiya, I cannot tell such an abhorrent lie."

Mu'awiya was seething now. He felt as if it wasn't Husain but his father, Ali Ibn Abi Talib sitting before him and he, Amir, was struggling to stay afloat in the storm of his eloquence and wisdom. Husain's arguments shattered all his dreams. He got up indignantly.

"Husain you are deliberately causing me distress with your obstinacy."

"Then you should abandon this preposterous idea of appointing Yazid as your heir. Hold free elections, or set up a counsel and leave the rest to them. They can decide who they want as your successor. But on the condition that the members of the council are selected impartially. They should not be your minions, they should be the true representatives of the public."

"And what should I tell my supporters in Syria and in other lands? They have already sworn allegiance to Yazid; they will make my life a living hell."

“No, if they believe in truth they will respect Islamic values. And they will be grateful to you for saving them from selling their principles. They do not support Yazid willingly, they are all troubled by his debauched ways. They remain silent only because they are afraid of you.”

“Husain! You do not understand the finer points of politics. You have lived so long as a recluse, away from all this, that you have no idea what practical wisdom is.”

“I have not been living in isolation because I am apathetic or lazy. I am a victim of your scheming. I have spent most of my time pondering these finer points so I understand them better than you do. As for practical wisdom, I consider this ‘talent’ of yours a sin, one that has resulted in many wrongdoings which are responsible for the death of a people, and against which Islam took a stand so that evil could be destroyed. You adopted the lifestyle of the non-believers, their ways, their oppressive restrictions, their brutal system that allows the enslavement of the masses by a few powerful and selfish people. You adopted their ruthlessness and their use of force. Where at one time there were devoted powerful idolaters, there now stand a few influential Muslims. Money that was once circulated freely for the advancement of trade in the land, is now controlled by a handful of administrators, while thousands remain penniless. The gold and silver that was once used for exchanging goods has now been reserved for adorning your palaces. All the wealth has become the personal property of a few people, whereas millions have been left with nothing. Business and commerce are dying, art and literature are being stifled, you import grand artifacts from abroad even as your own craftsmen struggle. Unemployment is on the rise, the common man has barely enough to eat. People are

disillusioned with your style of governance, so you need greater armies and more weapons to silence them and for which you extract money from the very people whose lives will be extinguished by these weapons."

Amir Mu'awiya loved everything about his son. The blood of his beautiful, free-spirited mother flowed through his veins. He had a temper and was extravagant. Amir was proud of everything he did. His dogs were pure-bred and did not touch anything but fresh meat, while the ordinary man hungered for a few dry scraps. He had a favourite monkey whom he had named Abul Qais. Everyday, dressed in garments made of silk and brocade, he travelled around the city in a gold carriage.

But the picture that Husain Ibn Ali presented of Yazid was so comical that it made Amir exceedingly angry. "You are exaggerating," he said irritably. "Yazid is handsome, women are madly in love with him, he is young and carefree, he has the heart of a poet, he adores beauty. All these prove that he is kindhearted and, anyway, dressing well and having a liking for perfume is Rasullullah's tradition."

An expression of sadness and anguish spread across Husain's face. He said sorrowfully, "This is the tragedy of this era. Islam and Rasulullah's traditions are being marred and selfishly altered to assume odious meanings. Your courtiers and underlings must no doubt compliment you for this reasoning, but those who are wise understand these things very well. They are witnessing the end of Islamic traditions and are in shock. But remember, Amir, the Arab nation can sometimes become momentarily paralysed. However, a fake coin cannot survive for long. All your scheming will prove to be futile one day. This dormant

populace will awaken and your sand palaces will crumble, your dreams will be shattered."

"Are you threatening me?"

"No, I am merely warning you of what is to come. You have power and wealth. If you want, you can use them to serve the common man, you can take the Arab nation to great heights."

"I beg you Husain, do not quarrel with me. I want peace and good relations with you. I am extending my hand of friendship towards you, but you are rejecting it disdainfully. I am ready to fulfill your every demand. Present your conditions, God willing, I will not fall short."

"I only have one demand. Give the Arab nation the right to exist, not on the threats of your armies but on the basis of your noble character, your sincerity, your sense of justice. Win their hearts without crushing them. End this reign of imperialism and establish democracy. Let the common man have the means to spend like you and your son do. Dismiss incompetent and inexperienced administrators, utilise the country's wealth for the development and welfare of the people, just as it was done during the time of Rasulullah and the Caliphs of the Rashidun. That was the time when the Arab nation had power over the entire world."

Mu'awiya was exasperated.

"Why are you consumed with the woes of the world? Husain, let go of this desire for conquest that you harbour in your heart. You will not be able to triumph over me. Don't test my patience. Don't put hot coals on the hand that is extended towards you in friendship. Don't accuse me later of being inconsiderate. You cannot imagine how much I have put up with. I sent you fine garments and gifts

and you returned them arrogantly. Is this how you treat my generosity and largesse?"

"Amir, the woes of this world were the woes of my grandfather, Rasulullah. He passed them on to me as his legacy. The problems of my grandfather's followers are mine. How can I turn away from them? What will I do with the garments that are a symbol of your generosity and benevolence? They cannot cover the nakedness of my people. Open your eyes Amir, and look at the condition of the person on the street. His clothes are in tatters, he has no shoes. Meanwhile, your beloved son does not wear the same garment twice. Amir, you have snatched the chadars from the heads of ordinary Arab women while you dress the dancers and harlots in your palaces in silks and brocades."

"Oh, so you are jealous of my grand lifestyle," Amir said sarcastically.

Husain smiled. "It is, in fact, the opposite of what you say. You are envious of my poverty. You are afraid of it. Despite your massive armies and armoured fortresses, you are afraid of this dervish, because God has blessed me with the wealth of contentment. Compared to it, all your gold, silver and precious jewels are worthless, your grandeur and extravagance are hollow. By God, you can neither seize my dominion nor can you buy it and, for this reason, you have been forced to make this entreaty. But this is my legacy, it cannot be sold, just like the blood running through my veins cannot be sold. And I cannot loan it since it is not mine to give either. It stays in my safekeeping, for my people."

Saying this, Husain Ibn Ali stood up!

Reality

When Husain Ibn Ali came out of this meeting with Mu'awiya, a long shadow fell across his feet.

“Abbas!” He drew a sigh of relief and leaned on his younger brother. Abbas felt the weight of his ageing brother’s hand on his shoulder and he straightened himself proudly.

They walked on in silence, lost in their thoughts. At a distance, they could hear the soft tread of seemingly random passersby. But Husain knew they belonged to Abbas’s friends who were always around to protect him if the need arose. He remained quiet. He, too, did not trust Amir Mu'awiya.

When they reached home they discovered that everyone was still awake. Even the infants had not fallen asleep. If their mothers are restless, children cannot be restful.

They crowded around the Imam. The children sat up in their mother’s laps, the young men and women respectfully kneeled nearby. For a while there was total silence, as if everyone was quietly resting under a shady fig tree.

Like his grandfather and his father, Husain Ibn Ali had always treated the children of the family with great love and respect. Even if he was worried and anxious, he never sent them away saying, “All right children, why don’t you go and play.” In fact, at every crucial juncture, he included them in all important conversations. He would call them one by one by name, and without holding anything back, explain everything.

Adults are always afraid to give children bad news. They lie—'Amma is in the hospital, Abba is on tour.' Husain always felt it was vital that he share all his troubles with the children. He regarded their opinions as important. Every child in the Prophet's family knew that the entire family was in constant danger and that their every move had to be a cautious one. If the enemy had his way, a terrible catastrophe would befall them, they would have to suffer dreadful ordeals, they could also have their throats slit.

There were two options. They could either live in fear and die a coward's death, or give up their lives honourably, under the leadership of the Imam. They also realised that no matter in what part of the world they would hide in, they would be pursued. They would have to endure humiliation and insult. Death was a reality that could catch up with them at any time. The only question was how to welcome death with honour and sacrifice their lives in the name of truth, because that would be true martyrdom.

The Imam related his entire conversation with Amir in great detail. Everyone listened attentively, made every effort to understand what he was saying, asked questions. No one cowered in fear nor did any of the children hide fearfully in their mother's bosom. This was all because of the excellent education they had received. The children were wise beyond their years.

The boys would discuss the illustrious and honourable ways in which they would sacrifice their lives for Husain. They would not let any harm come to him. They would die, but not bow down. The girls knew that their chadars would be snatched away from their heads, that they would be openly insulted in the bazaars, because this was what fate had in store for them.

Although the children knew everything, none of them was in the habit of panicking or losing control. Death is a reality. Why be afraid of it? But caution was essential. They also remembered the final words of their illustrious grandfather, Ali Ibn Abi Talib; he had told them that only unity would save them from a dishonourable death. If they followed the lead of their Imam, they would fare well. He was not only their family, he was also their leader. They had observed him since they were little and had never seen any contradiction in his principles and his actions. Nurtured and educated by him, they were becoming just like him. The children were imbibing what he loved, what he hated, his abilities of discernment and his wisdom.

Husain did not differentiate between his own children and the others in the family. His children were closer to their aunt, Zainab than to their own mother. For Qasim, his uncle, Husain was like his father, and all the children adored Abbas. Greater than the individual was the family. No one went outside the house alone any more, members of the household travelled together in a group and kept an eye on each other.

After his conversation with Husain, Amir Mu'awiya firmly understood that he was not going to be able to influence him. Husain had left after giving him an uncompromising and resolute response. Medina had been taken care of but Mecca was going to be a hard nut to crack. All eyes were on Husain. Keeping the popular sentiment in mind Amir decided to abandon the idea of demanding allegiance to Yazid for the time being. Later, when things were calmer and the ground more even, he would raise the question once again. The inhabitants of Mecca were proud and determined, it would not be possible to use force against them or be harsh with

them. If the Meccans became rebellious then other regions would be encouraged to do follow their example.

Succumbing to a series of illnesses, Amir Mu'awiya Ibn Abu Sufiyan died on 15 Rajab of Hijri 4. At this time, his beloved son was not with him. He was away on a hunting trip in the region where his mother's family resided.

On his deathbed, Amir Mu'awiya was quite distraught and wept uncontrollably. He was shaking with remorse at the thought of all the people he had mercilessly mistreated. Again and again he said, "What I did was wrong."

When Yazid received news of his father's death he rushed back but he was not destined to see the face of the man who had loved him so dearly. Nor was he able to help carry his body to the grave. He went to his grave and wept bitterly. Then he addressed the people: "O people of Syria, we are on the right path. God is our helper, we shall always be protected and blessed. We are just, but we don't encourage wrongdoing. We will not be remiss in defeating the enemies of Islam. We will severely punish those who betray the country."

The rich elite and the governors of Syria heard their Caliph speak and bowed before his command and swore their allegiance at his hand.

"Without doubt I have complete confidence in your loyalty. My respected father also recognised your merit and value. I will walk in his footsteps. My father was a great ruler, one who was just; a brave and eloquent leader."

Just then, someone called out from the crowd, "Lies, all lies! You and your father are both vile men."

People were furious when they heard these harsh remarks and, suddenly, there was a huge commotion. A frantic search for the person who had uttered those words ensued but there

was no sign of him. God only knows where he disappeared to save his life.

Then Yazid's relatives and companions proceeded to congratulate him heartily and offer him their good wishes. For the next few days, lavish gatherings were organised. Yazid gave away extravagant gifts to the guests and then hand-picked some from among them to be his representatives. These men were dispatched across the land to obtain oaths of allegiance.

Most of Yazid's enemies had already been finished off by Mu'awiya. The only threat came from four important men.

First, Husain Ibn Ali.

Second, Abdullah Ibn Omar, son of the second caliph, Omar Farooq.

Third, Abdullah Ibn Zubair.

Fourth, Abdul Rahman, son of the first caliph, Hazrat Abu Bakr.

Yazid was not a seasoned politician like Amir Mu'awiya. He was not patient like him and did not believe in being tactful. He could not tolerate even a moment of opposition. So he immediately issued an order that these men be coerced into swearing their allegiance to him, especially Husain Ibn Ali, since he was their leader. He should be the one to be pressured the most. And if they did not agree right away, Yazid ordered, then their heads should be struck off and presented to him. An army would be sent to assist them so that any chaos or disturbance that might ensue could be suppressed.

The moment he received these orders the Governor of Medina sent for Husain Ibn Ali and Abdullah Ibn Zubair. They were both in the mosque at the time.

"Why don't you go on ahead, we will follow right behind you," they said, in an attempt to fend off the guard.

"Why have we been summoned at night?" Abdullah Ibn Zubair asked.

"It looks like Amir Mu'awiya has died and the news has not become public as yet. Yazid probably wants to consolidate his position before news of his father's death travels. Perhaps we have been sent for to swear the oath of allegiance."

"In that case, what is your plan?"

"I will never give him my oath of allegiance. Amir broke his promise to my brother. No Caliph has the right to appoint an heir. This is an insult to the laws of Islam."

"Obtaining an oath by force is unlawful and a sin."

Both men continued their conversation until they reached Husain Ibn Ali's home. Abdullah Ibn Zubair quietly disappeared. When Husain Ibn Ali entered his house, he gathered the family around him, as was his custom. The question of governor Walid's invitation was presented before everyone.

His relatives became angry. Qasim Ibn Hasan pulled out his sword, Ali Akbar stood up indignantly, a frown appeared on Abbas's forehead.

"You will not go and meet this contemptible governor," they all cried out in unison.

Aun and Muhammad became distraught as well. They ran to their mother, Zainab Bint Ali.

"Please give us our swords. Mamu Jaan has been summoned by the governor of Medina. We will avenge this insult, blood will be shed today. If we can't be of any help to our Mamu Jaan now, then what is the purpose of our life?"

When the children gave her the news Zainab Bint Ali's face turned ashen. A paroxysm of pain gripped her heart and she started weeping. The moment she had feared the most had finally arrived. She sighed and placed her hand to her heart.

"The governor of Medina does not mean well. He is my brother's enemy. What has my brother done? What is his crime? Tell him to come to me. I want to know what is it that has upset everyone so much. If he goes alone, I will create a hue and cry. I will give up my life if even a single hair on his head is harmed. If there is any danger, everyone should go armed. Tell him, he must take me along as well."

Husain came in. The minute she saw his face, his sister began to sob again.

"Arre Zainab, why are you crying? The governor has sent for me, but no one has the courage to hurt Ibn Ali. I am free from blame."

"I am feeling very apprehensive."

"By God, there's nothing to worry about, I will not go there alone."

Just as they were about to leave, Zainab sent for Abbas and said, "My dear one, please don't leave your brother alone even for a minute. After he has finished speaking to Walid, remain by his side. One cannot trust that wretched governor's words or actions. Go, I entrust you to God's care."

After reassuring his sister, Husain began preparing for his departure. He rounded up forty of his closest companions and family members and set off for the governor of Medina's residence.

Meanwhile, the governor of Medina was beset with anxiety. Yazid's letter had left him in a state of shock.

He thought, 'What an idiot the king is. How can I go after Fatima's beloved son? How can I possibly martyr Rasulullah's grandson? I can't think of any crime that I can charge him with. He is neither interested in the caliphate, nor is he demanding that its reigns be handed over him. But he still has to be called in.' If there was even the slightest sign of negligence on Walid's part, complaints would be made against him in court and he would be arrested on fabricated charges.

Upon their arrival at the governor's house, Husain said to his companions, "You all stay here, there is no need for everyone to accompany me."

The others agreed quietly, but Abbas was adamant. "Take me with you, our sister has ordered me to stay by your side at all times. If you go in alone we will be sick with worry."

"No Abbas, I will go by myself. You keep a close watch from here, I assure you nothing will happen."

Walid was a weak man and Marwan had been sent to keep an eye on him so that any laxity on his part could be reported back immediately to Yazid.

Walid graciously welcomed Husain and presented Yazid's letter to him. Husain offered condolences on the death of Amir Mu'awiya.

"What, then, is your reply?" he asked hesitantly.

"What is it that you seek a reply to?"

"The question of pledging allegiance to the Caliph. Perhaps you didn't read the letter."

"I read the letter and you know my answer. I can give up my life, but I cannot take a false oath. The misfortunes we have suffered have rendered us all helpless. But I have some responsibilities, some obligations. The people trust me, they respect my opinion. I do not consider Yazid worthy

of the caliphate. Everyone is displeased with this man who is notorious for his misdeeds. How can I regard him as my leader? One needs to have faith and trust to take the oath of allegiance and I don't trust Yazid."

"Please think again."

"I have been thinking about this for years. Do I not have the right to refuse to take the oath of allegiance? If the majority is with Yazid then he can rule without our allegiance. We don't need to sell our conscience."

With this the Imam stood up.

Marwan said to Walid, "You have probably not read the letter fully, Walid. Read it again carefully."

"Why do you say that?"

"You have not mentioned the last part of the letter, which is very important. Here, take a closer look. It says, 'If Husain Ibn Ali refuses to pledge allegiance, his head should be struck off and presented to me.'"

"You evil man! You dare to threaten me?"

When the Imam raised his voice, his armed companions, who were standing with their ears glued to the door, rushed in with their swords drawn. Walid and Marwan were alone and unarmed, as forty young men stood before them seething in anger. Husain calmed them down with great difficulty.

"No, this goes against the principles of dignity and valour. The brave do not attack those who are unarmed."

"O Husain, forgive our impudence, but it is best to finish off these dogs who have been nurtured on royal scraps."

But the Imam pacified the young men and together they returned home.

After they had left, Marwan said, "You are a fool, Walid. You gave up a unique opportunity. Husain could have been easily slain, and his companions, too. One order from you

and everyone would have been killed. The matter would have been settled for good right here."

"I do not want to taint my hands with Husain's blood," Walid replied.

"Don't you have the slightest desire to earn your caliph's favour?"

"No, I don't want to earn any favours by murdering Husain. After all, one has to die one day and face one's maker."

"What nonsense is this, Walid, talk about living not dying. Do you know what will happen if the caliph finds out?"

Breaking into a sweat, Walid sat down quickly, his body was trembling. He knew that the Caliph not only liked hunting animals, he had also mastered the art of killing human beings by slowly torturing them.

When a person gets tired of entertainment and sensual pleasures, he looks for newer ways to amuse himself; instead of indulging in revelry and merriment, he starts taking pleasure in the screams of tormented human beings. This way, one can enjoy a change of flavour.

The Call

When news of Amir Mu'awiya's death and his ruthless son's ascent to the throne spread, people became distraught. But when they heard that Husain Ibn Ali had refused to pledge allegiance to Yazid, their faces shone with relief, their shattered hopes were revived.

Although Husain Ibn Ali's admirers had been crushed, there were people who were still hoping in their hearts that they could find another way, that there would be some means by which they could survive. All the Muslims secretly gathered at the house of Salman Ibn Sarar and they agreed that if they formed an alliance, became Husain's followers, sent for him and acknowledged him as their Caliph, their troubles would be over. Having arrived at that decision, they wrote a letter to Husain requesting him to come to Kufa. The letter said:

There is no Imam to protect us. Please come and give us, unfortunate people, your support. If you come, we will offer our absolute loyalty. We will sacrifice our lives for you, we will oust the present ruler. For God's sake, come quickly. If you don't, the greatness of Islam will be wiped out and you will be the one responsible for this destruction and ruin. You are the Prophet's grandson and his people are going through a catastrophic time. No one but you can come to our rescue. Please come as soon as you can, we are eagerly waiting for you.

This letter, signed by prominent members of the community, was dispatched to Husain Ibn Ali. After this,

there was a constant stream of letters as people started sending him one petition after another.

Husain studied all of them carefully and fell into deep thought. It was clear to him that staying on in Mecca was impossible now. The enemy was making plans to surround him from all sides and attack. He had to go somewhere. But before he left for Kufa he wanted to send someone reliable to investigate the truth and make sure that the letter was not some kind of a trick or ploy to deceive him.

He sent for Muslim Ibn Aqeel, his paternal uncle's son.

"Muslim, go to Kufa and assess the situation carefully. In the meantime, we will begin preparations for travel. If your response is favourable then we will leave immediately."

Muslim Ibn Aqeel set off on his journey that same day. His two young sons, Aun and Ibrahim were visiting their mother's family in Kufa. He thought he would meet them and, if circumstances permitted, bring them back with him. Aun and Ibrahim were eight and nine, and were attending school in Kufa.

The journey was long and arduous. Muslim Ibn Aqeel was accompanied by two guides who knew the desert well. Suddenly, dark clouds appeared from the south.

"Muslim Ibn Aqeel, we are about to face trouble," said one of the guides.

"What are these clouds?"

"These are not clouds, this is the destructive desert windstorm known as *khamseen*. It is a harbinger of death."

"Is there an oasis nearby?" Muslim Ibn Aqeel inquired. He had turned pale at the mention of *khamseen*.

"There is one, but we won't be able to get there in time. The storm is advancing rapidly towards us. Within half an hour, we will be caught in it and annihilated."

“What should we do?”

“Nothing, except maybe move faster towards the storm and try to cross it. We can’t run away from it. It will catch up with us in the blink of an eye.”

“But wouldn’t running towards the storm be like walking into the jaws of death.”

“This is the only way. Some have managed to survive this way. Perhaps one or two of us might be saved. We’ll tear through the storm, there will be peace on the other side.”

The three of them advanced towards the storm on their camels. They were crushed by the impact of the collision, even the clothes on their bodies disappeared. Blasts of fiery wind flung them onto the ground, they couldn’t control their camels. Thick pellets of sand flew around them like cotton fluff. The high dunes turned into caves and fissures, the valleys rose to become mountains. The men tried to protect their face with their turban but to no avail. Their mouth, nose and ears were filled with sand, their throat seemed to be choked, their lungs were ready to explode.

When Muslim came around, he found himself partially buried in the sand. The storm had moved on. He was surrounded by the silence of death. In the dim light of the moon, he saw people’s shadows around him, some standing, some sitting.

Where was he? With great difficulty, when Muslim freed himself from the sand he was horrified to see that the shadows he thought were people were actually skeletons. The remains of those who had been buried in the last storm had surfaced when the sands had shifted. They were lying in the same position in which they had been buried.

His companions and the camels had disappeared. The goatskin water bags were buried under mounds of sand.

Muslim Ibn Aqeel crawled out from this place that was inhabited by skeletons, gathered his tattered clothes, covered himself up, and started walking.

He didn't know for how long he staggered along, falling and lifting himself up as he continued to shuffle forward. His life was very dear to him, he was Husain's messenger. He would be waiting for Muslim's letter. The thought of Husain was enough to keep him going. He continued to stagger and stumble without stopping.

His lips were chapped and bleeding, his tongue was rough and lifeless, like a piece of dry leather. But he knew he had to fight death. He couldn't die just yet. He would become unconscious, then the night dew would revive him and he would continue to crawl ahead.

It seemed like centuries had passed. Who knows how many days and nights went by? Along the way, he came across more skeletons of men and camels. His own companions were buried somewhere under mountains of sand. When there was another storm some day they would be unearthed as skeletons.

Finally, when Muslim could go no further he collapsed on a mound of sand and lost consciousness. Suddenly, he felt drops of rain on his face. With great difficulty he opened his eyes that were filled with sand. A shadowy figure was leaning over him. He felt the presence of a living person and then fainted once again.

When he opened his eyes next he found himself lying on a straw mat. There were people sitting around him, talking. Someone put a cup of milk to his lips and the burning line of sand in his throat slowly started to disappear.

“Laila saved your life, O stranger. You have been blessed with a long life.”

An elderly man smiled and said, "Coming out alive from a *khamseen* is a miracle."

"I have been assigned an important duty. My companions and I got lost as we were making our way and they were killed in the storm."

"It is indeed very strange that you survived."

Muslim Ibn Aqeel gave them a detailed account of who he was and of his lineage. The members of this small tribe were happy to learn about him. They lived in isolation, were naïve and unworldly, and although they called themselves Muslims, were not too familiar with the precepts of prayer and fasting. Muslim was not fit to walk, he needed rest. Laila diligently nursed him back to health. Muslim was able to read the message in her doe-like eyes but there was nothing he could say. He had been entrusted with a very critical assignment.

"On my return from Kufa, I will stop over. If life permits, we will meet again," he promised Laila.

When he was leaving, they provided him with camels, guides and all the other things he needed for his journey. They travelled with him a long distance before parting ways. Laila drenched the collar of his robe with her tears.

"Take me with you."

"This is not the right time. I will be very busy. When a decision has been made and peace has been established, I will come for you."

"It is said that the people of Kufa are not trustworthy. I am frightened. You might get into trouble. In my tribe you will find loyal and loving friends. Life here is very calm and peaceful."

"Yes, this little paradise is very alluring. I feel I could stay here forever. But I have been assigned to Husain's service,

I cannot leave him. He is very troubled at this time, he is under a lot of pressure from all sides." Muslim explained the situation to Laila.

"If only he too would come and be a part of our beautiful paradise. Away from the world's troubles, he could live a calm life. This is a safe haven, no one would be able to bother him here and we will devote our lives to him."

Carrying the ache of Laila's love in his heart, Muslim Ibn Aqeel resumed his journey to Kufa.

When he got there, people welcomed him with open arms. Those who had been in hiding and were living in fear, came out courageously to greet him. They surrounded him, bombarding him with questions: When is Husain Ibn Ali arriving? We are eagerly waiting for him. That day, 1,800 people pledged their allegiance to Husain. People arrived in large numbers from the nearby towns as well, and those who had escaped persecution by disappearing into neighbouring villages also returned.

The citizens were feeling more audacious because the governor of Kufa was quiet and had not interfered in what was going on. He had been receiving news of Muslim's triumph but he remained a silent bystander.

This was a trick on the part of the governor. He was waiting for Husain Ibn Ali's arrival. He would deal with his supporters after that. He wanted to see who Husain's allies were. He had sent out his spies into the city and they were giving him a minute-by-minute account of the goings-on. People had openly gathered in the town square and were chanting slogans in Husain's favour. Meanwhile, the spies secretly made a note of their names and addresses.

Muslim Ibn Aqeel wrote Husain a letter that same day and sent it off with a messenger:

My Lord, come here as soon as you can. The conditions are satisfactory. People are ready to sacrifice everything for you. There is a continuous stream of supporters taking the oath of alligience in your name. The governor is in a state of shock, he is nervous. Before the news of these developments reaches Damascus come and provide leadership and guidance to your followers.

After he received Muslim Ibn Aqeel's missive, Husain Ibn Ali decided it was time to bid farewell to Mecca. His friends expressed their apprehension.

"Lord, the people of Kufa are not dependable. They are deceitful. Don't leave Mecca. You have friends and sympathisers here, this is your home."

The Imam replied, "It is difficult for me to stay here now. When the Caliph receives my reply informing him of my unwillingness to pledge my alligience, armies will be deployed to destroy me. If I am attacked, my companions will stand with me. I do not want bloodshed. I do not want others to be killed along with me. If Muslims shed each others' blood in these streets, the sanctity of Mecca will be destroyed."

"And what if the people of Kufa betray you?"

"In that case, too, my death is certain. But I want to die a short distance away from Mecca so that the blood of the relatives of the Prophet of God does not flow in this sacred city. I do not want history books to record that only fifty years after the Prophet's death, Muslims forgot his eminence. If I have to die then for me this place and Kufa are one and the same. And perhaps it is also possible that the people of Kufa prove to be faithful. They are imploring me to come with earnest promises. It is not right to doubt them."

It was only two days before the commencement of hajj, but the Imam decided not to undertake the pilgrimage

because he knew that a vast net had been laid out to murder him. There would be more than thirty assassins hiding in the swarming Hajj crowds, armed with poisoned daggers hidden in their shirtsleeves, waiting for an opportunity to finish him off. Having done their job, they would disappear in the crowd leaving some innocent man to get caught in their place. No one would be able to suspect anything during Hajj. Everyone would be busy performing the rites of pilgrimage. Following this, tumultuous disturbances would be instigated and members of the Prophet's family along with their supporters would be killed one by one on the pretext of inciting trouble. And, in this way, the one who was a thorn in Yazid's side would be removed forever. Afterwards, Husain's staunchest allies would also be vanquished.

The Imam said, "I do not want to die an anonymous death. The world shall see and recognise my murderers." Saying this, he started planning his journey.

People said, "Go if you have to, but please do not take the women and children with you. We will protect them here. Once you have arrived safely and seen for yourself if the conditions are stable then you can send for them."

When the Imam's cherished sister heard this she announced loudly, "O Ibn Abbas! I do not care who goes and who stays, but I will definitely accompany you. I cannot live without my brother."

"All my family members will accompany me. I cannot separate any of them from myself. The sheep that wanders away from its flock becomes a meal for the wolf. They will suffer the same fate as me. We can hide in any corner of the world but our enemies will still succeed in finding us. As long as even a drop of the blood of the Prophet of God

remains, Yazid will feel threatened. Whatever has to happen after I am gone, will happen. If we have to die, then we will die together."

Zainab's husband, Abdullah Ibn Jafar had also started making preparations for travel, but Husain stopped him.

"It is my desire that you stay here."

"Ya Husain, how can I remain here and not support you?"

"You can stay here and support me. Look after those who are not coming with me. Your life is not in any danger. The Caliph is not threatened by you. You can send me news of what happens here."

When Zainab heard that her husband was not going, she became agitated. Maybe he would forbid her from going, too. She went and sat next to him and started crying.

He asked her gently, "What have I done my dear, that you weep like this?"

"My brother is leaving. You know that we have never been apart from each other. How can I let him go while I stay here in comfort? But I cannot take even a single step without your permission. Please tell me what you have decided for me."

Abdullah Ibn Jafar looked at her lovingly, then smiled and said, "O Bint Ali, you know that your tears cause me great distress. Please wipe them away and don't despair. I give you the authority to decide whether you want to go with your brother, or stay here. Either way, I will have no complaints. You are my life partner, your absence will be painful for me, but Husain will need your love there. His children are attached to you, and soon I will be there as well. Please, my dear, do not cry, I can't bear to see you in tears."

"I would not have gone, but times are bad. All kinds of fears grip my heart. May this journey auger well for my brother. If I do not go with him I will be constantly thinking

of him. I will go mad with anxiety, a sense of uncertainty will make every moment unbearable for me. I will only be at peace if I am with him."

Zainab felt immense relief after she had secured her husband's permission. She asked, "Can I take Aun and Muhammad with me?"

"Do you think they will stay here without you? Please inform me of your safe arrival as soon as you get there. The moment our dear Sughra is feeling better, I too will join you. Go Zainab, I entrust you to God's care."

With that Zainab began preparing for the journey.

The Journey

A cloud of grief and sorrow hangs over the entire city. In every household there is talk that the Prophet of Islam's grandson, Husain Ibn Ali, is leaving, he is departing from Medina. The news spreads that the Prophet's family home is about to become desolate. People's hearts are sinking, the wind is in mourning and the air is filled with melancholy.

Everyone is ready, their belongings have been packed. People are coming in large numbers to meet Husain and bid farewell, they fall at his feet and sob. He lifts them up, embraces them, offers words of comfort. "If life permits, we will meet again," he says.

Abbas's friends and close companions look at him with sadness and nostalgia. All those pastimes, the gatherings, everything will soon become a dream. With his departure all those interesting activities they shared will be finished.

Qasim's friends also stand nearby with fallen faces, their eyes welling with tears. Everyone is feeling apprehensive, their faces are ashen. Never again will there be a dear friend like Ali Akbar; a mature and elegant personality like his will never be forgotten. A vacuum will be created, the get-togethers will be depressing, even scholarly discussions will lose their vigour. Zainab Bint Ali's sons, Aun and Muhammad, who are only a year apart, are also standing with their school friends, holding back tears, with forced smiles on their faces.

"You are leaving? School will not be any fun without you. We will miss you very much. Don't forget us."

"How can we forget you? How can we forget these streets?" The brothers try to comfort their friends.

"It will be such a rough journey, it is so hot, you will face many difficulties. Don't go. Your father is not going, is he?"

"But Amma is going, and Baba Jaan will join us in a few days. We have to go. Mamu Jaan is going. He has raised us with so much love and devotion, how can we let him suffer the trials and tribulations of this journey alone, while we stay here in comfort and ease? This is the opportunity to repay him for all his kindness. We will be ready with our swords if, God forbid, someone even dares to think of causing him harm."

People were lining up to call on Husain. Earlier, they were unable to meet him because of official constraints and also because they were afraid. But now he was leaving, they let go of their fears and apprehensions and rushed to see him. After all, who knew what life had in store, or when they would meet again.

Everyone was sorrowful, their eyes were moist with tears. Upon hearing the news of the departure of the Prophet's family, shops were shut down, the bazaars were deserted. Husain's going away was being quietly mourned in every home. Yathrib would be deserted, as the Prophet's beloved grandson was being forced to leave his home. What was this helplessness? There was a sense of despair everywhere, people whispered Husain's name and shed silent tears.

"Shah-e-Medina is leaving, who will look out for us now?" the poor and the indigent lamented.

The Imam comforted everyone.

“Allah is your protector and keeper. I am destined to make this journey, and neither you nor I can erase what is in our fate. God willing, and if life permits, we will meet again.”

Groups of women were visiting the women of the Imam’s household.

“Oh God, what a tragic time it is. Fatima’s beloved son is leaving, how distraught her soul must be. Oh Zainab Bibi, who will guide us in your absence, who will comfort us lovingly, who will reassure us when we fall on hard times?”

Whether there was a wedding or bereavement in their family, the women looked towards Zainab for comfort and relief. She would tirelessly tend to the sick, stay by their side at night, and was always around to offer any kind of support that was needed. While sending her off, the women embraced her and wept uncontrollably.

“Hai, Sister, you are leaving the house that your elders built in a shambles. Medina will be a desolate place when you all are not there. Convince the Imam to reconsider. The people of Kufa are frauds and impostors, each one more deceitful and tyrannical than the other. That was where the scoundrels martyred the Lion of God, and now you are all going there, too. This is not wise.”

Zainab embraced each one and consoled them: “The world is closing in on us. This is our destiny. We are being separated from Yathrib, life is now difficult for us here as well. My brother is not happy leaving, he is being forced to go. He leaves and I stay here, safe from harm! No, that cannot be. The sorrow I feel at leaving my mother’s resting place is heart-breaking. Whenever I was sad and depressed, I visited her grave and felt comforted.”

“But travelling at this time is difficult, and what if the people of Kufa betray you all once again?”

“What happens will be God’s will. And I am used to living in the midst of poverty and want. But when I look at my brother, I feel despondent. Amma appears in my dreams every day, anxious and worried, her eyes filled with tears, as if her soul is troubled. She weeps as she says to me, ‘Zainab, don’t leave your brother’s side. I have entrusted him to your care, my beloved daughter. Take care of my son who is alone and friendless at this time. If you remain by his side as his companion and confidante, he will be able to bear the burden of his sorrows. It is true, God is everyone’s keeper. But if you abandon Husain, my soul will not be at peace. Just think that you are in my place, you have taken on my responsibilities.’”

When the women broke into a lament, Zainab said, “It is a difficult journey with no destination in sight, a journey during which one cannot expect to be free from fear or care. But how can I ignore my mother’s last wish? This is the only older brother I am left with now. If he is gone then I will have no maternal home. Whatever comes my way, I will endure it happily.”

Husain came in at this time and said, “Zainab, how long will you cry? Come now, bid farewell to these people. Our belongings are packed, the camels are saddled and ready. It is early morning, a cool breeze is blowing, we have children with us; if we leave now we will be able to journey while it is still cool.”

“I am ready, my brother.”

“Then send for Asghar’s cradle. And make sure that we do not disturb Sughra. She is asleep. It is best not to wake her.”

“Bhai, you will leave without saying farewell to the sick child? She will be inconsolable ... Bhai, do not make this

mistake. Who says Sughra is asleep? She was tossing and turning all night. She is conscious for a few minutes and then faints from the fever."

"But my heart breaks at the thought of saying goodbye to her. She is so ill, and then if she cries she will feel worse. What good will come from going to see her? Why don't you go and make small talk to distract her."

"I've been talking to her all night, with her head resting on my knees. She gets agitated at the thought of being separated from everyone."

Just then they heard Bano's voice. "Hai, please come and see what has happened to my child!"

Zainab ran to her. "Do not worry, she must have fainted."

"She is not dead, is she?"

"No, no, she will regain consciousness in a minute." Zainab sprinkled water on Sughra's face.

"A curse upon this journey, my heart is so fearful! Who will stay with this sick girl?"

"God is our keeper. Sughra is fond of Ummul Buneen who is staying behind with her. She had been insisting on accompanying her sons, but Bhai comforted her and explained, 'Amma, you are getting on in years. Once we are settled, then, God willing, Abbas will come and fetch you and Sughra.'"

"I am very worried, but you are right, we cannot take Sughra with us. Perhaps I should leave Sakina and Asghar here, they will keep her company and she will feel better."

"No, Bhai has ordered that no girl be left behind. In Sughra's case, there is no choice, but Sakina is very young, she will miss her mother. She is also very attached to her uncle Abbas, she won't be able to bear his absence. And

Kubra cannot be left behind because as soon as we are settled in Kufa, we will have Qasim and Kubra's nikah in accordance with my older brother wishes."

"Yes, but what shall I do? We are ready to leave and I cannot stop worrying about my sick daughter."

Everyone gathered to bid farewell to Sughra.

"Dear child, open your eyes, we are leaving. Will you not put your arms around us and say goodbye?"

Kubra, her older sister, kissed her forehead that was burning with fever.

"Kiss me," Sakina whispered.

"See how Asghar is looking at you, and see, Baba Jaan has come, too."

Husain took the sick girl in his arms and held her close to his bosom. Those standing around broke into sobs.

"Father's beloved, do not cry. If we delay our departure, the sun will become unbearable. We must go."

The sick girl looked at her father for a moment, too distraught to say anything. She closed her eyes and rested her face on his chest. Then, ignoring her pain, she smiled and said, "Baba, God be with you, go safely. I won't cry anymore."

Husain gestured to Bano to find out where Akbar was. "He should bid farewell to his sister."

Akbar came forward, looking extremely distressed.

"Tell her gently that she should not cry or her fever will worsen."

Akbar looked at his sister tearfully. He managed a smile with difficulty. "What is it, my doll, are you angry with me? My dear, what have I done?"

"I can never be angry with you, Bhai. I wish you safe travel, my dearest brother, but you must promise me something."

"Order me, my dearest, I will do anything you ask."

“Don’t get married until I come there.”

“I will not, I promise. Anything else?”

“Find a beautiful bride and then send for me. I will come and dress you up as a bridegroom.”

“Of course, I will not be a bridegroom until you come.”

“You will also have to give me a gift on your wedding. And if I don’t get well and die, you must bring your bride to my grave. Place your gift on my grave, it will make my soul happy.”

“If you talk like this then, God knows, I won’t get married and I won’t bring a bride.”

“Where is Abbas Chacha? He must be too busy to say goodbye. And why not. After all, his beloved Sakina is going with him, I’m not important. Where is he? Allah, I would be happy to see him from afar.”

“I am here, waiting for my turn to see my princess,” said Abbas, coming forward. Sughra quickly opened her arms to embrace him and he held onto her tightly.

“You are leaving me behind. I will die, you’ll see. Then you will have to come back. You will come to carry my coffin, won’t you?”

“You just get well, my child. I promise that as soon as there is peace and calm in Kufa, I will get on the fastest horse I can find and come and get you. Promise me, you will listen to Amma, take your medicine regularly, and when I come for you, you will be strong and healthy and greet me joyfully. It is only a matter of a few days.”

“Allah, Chacha Jaan, please take me with you.”

“You are being stubborn, my child. You will not be able to endure the rigors of the journey, you will die on the way.”

“It is better to die in your arms than to be separated from you. If I die here, there won’t be anyone around to carry my bier. I will weep all the time, Chacha Jaan.”

"Bibi, how will you cry after you are dead?" Sakina asked innocently.

"Whether I'm dead or alive, I will keep crying, my soul will cry."

"May your enemies die! Come, Sakina, don't argue with your sick sister."

"I won't leave unless you hold me first and kiss me," Sakina said petulantly.

Sughra smiled.

"Hai, Munee, I will be thinking of your constant quibbling with me. Promise me, you won't keep all the gifts you receive at Akbar Bhai's wedding for yourself. You must insist on sending some for me."

"I promise. If the wedding takes place without you, I will cry and cry and cry so much that the bridegroom will have no choice but to leave the bride behind and run to fetch you."

Everyone started laughing.

"O my precious one, enough of coddling your sister. Come on now, embrace her and step aside. Won't you let Asghar say his goodbyes?" Bano said with a laugh and carried baby Asghar to Sughra. Taking his small hand in hers, Bano placed it on his forehead and said, "Here, Bibi, Asghar says salaam."

Seeing his sister, Asghar eagerly spread out his arms.

Sughra clasped her baby brother to her feverish bosom and broke into sobs.

"My brother, my precious one, may you live to be a thousand years old. Amma Jaan, please leave him here with me. I will get well in no time. I will take very good care of him, you won't have to worry at all. I will bathe him myself and dress him, give him fresh goat's milk, apply surma to his beautiful eyes, press his tiny feet to my eyes. I will take

one look at him and I will get well immediately, my fever will vanish."

"How can I leave him behind, my precious girl, he is not even six months old. He hasn't even learned how to drink from a small cup. How will you take care of him?"

"My dear Amma, I will manage. He will be worn out with the hardships of travelling. It will be so hot, there will be scorching winds, his beautiful hair will be filled with sand, these pink cheeks will get blisters."

"Don't be obstinate, my child, how can such a small baby live without his mother," Zainab explained patiently.

"You are right, Phupi Jaan, but Amma, promise you won't forget to tell him about me. In three or four months he will be older and he won't even know me. You must keep telling him that his unfortunate sister in Medina remembers him day and night and weeps. A curse upon this illness, it had to come on at this time so that I would be forced to stay here all alone, rotting away. All right, Baba Jaan, please hold me one more time."

Husain held Sughra again, and kissed and comforted her.

She said, "You are leaving. You are going without me, leaving me behind. My body will be here but my spirit will be at your feet."

The palanquins were brought to the doorstep, the screens were pulled up, and Abbas announced loudly, "People, do not climb onto your rooftops, and camel riders, do not pass this way because the respected women of the Prophet's household are getting onto the camel litters."

First, Zainab got in. Husain supported his sister's arm and helped her up. Abbas knelt to pick up her shoes, Ali Akbar came forward, and joining both palms together bolstered her up by her feet. After this, Bano, aided by her husband

and her sons, and with Asghar in her arms, climbed into the palanquin and settled in comfortably.

Husain looked around him wistfully. These streets, these neighbourhoods of his hometown, where he had spent his childhood and his youth, they were now going to be lost to him. God only knows if he would ever be fortunate enough to see them again. He had sat beside his grandfather's grave for hours, talking to him with his head resting on the tombstone.

"Naana Jaan, your Husain is leaving his home to wander about in unfamiliar places. Your prophecy has come true. We have no peace anywhere. If only I could have had the honour of giving my life at your feet."

Then, before dawn, he went to his mother's grave to bid her farewell.

"I have young children with me, our destination is unknown, what will befall us in the strange lands we are travelling to, I know not. But I have an inkling of what is to happen. If I did not have to consider the honour of the Kaa'ba, we would have remained at your feet, never left this place. Whenever my heart was filled with sorrow, visiting yours and Naana Jaan's tomb gave me comfort. The world doesn't wish to offer me even that much kindness. I have no one, and I am leaving now. If God is my helper, the desert will also become my home. This home is now foreign to me."

Husain bid all his friends farewell, turned a tearful gaze towards the earth and the sky of his homeland, and then ordered the caravan to move forward.

The Caravan

The journey began well. The route along which the caravan of the Prophet's family travelled became a picture of springtide. The wind danced in the desert and the woods. A small settlement would come up wherever they set up camp. People in the vicinity would rush to have the honour of meeting the Prophet's family. Shops would be set up, rows and rows of tea-houses would open up for business.

The general public was upset at the disrespect shown to the Prophet's innocent family, but could not express their feelings openly. Everyone was angered at the insult meted out to the Prophet's family. Husain had been forced to leave his home and the people could only look on helplessly, in silence.

They could do nothing else, but they did bring Husain's family generous gifts of grain, milk, cheese, dates, juices and animals. When Husain came out of his tent to greet them, a huge crowd would gather around him. Impoverished young men would come to pay their respects and the gifts would be distributed among them.

People would plead: "O Husain! Do not leave us alone like orphans. Our humble abodes are yours to stay in, these lush fields, these blossoming fruit trees, lakes and waterfalls, all of God's blessings here are for your use. Stay with us, we will not hesitate to sacrifice our lives for you. Our women worship Bint Ali. We will consider ourselves fortunate if we get the chance to serve you."

The Imam's eyes would become wet with tears. He would thank them, bless them with good wishes and explain: "Brothers, I am grateful to you, but I cannot delay my journey. The people of Kufa have sent for me, I have already accepted their warm invitation. They are waiting for me. You do not fully grasp the complexity of the situation. The Caliph does not think well of me. If I stay here longer he will accuse me of attempting to invade the region and will allege that I am establishing a new government. His armies will arrive here. You are peace-loving people, you will suffer great devastation. All this beauty and the spring-like atmosphere will be destroyed. You will lose your peace of mind because of me."

"We don't care, we will clash with the Caliph."

"That is what I am afraid of. You will not hesitate to oppose him. The Caliph will use this as an excuse to spill blood and I will be charged with this crime. The pages of history will condemn Husain as avaricious, greedy. You and I both will be finished fighting his vast armies. This is exactly what he wants and I will not allow it. If life permits, and if we come out of this alive and victorious, we will visit you one day to honour this devotion and dedication."

After carefully explaining the situation to people Husain would move on. If he had any ulterior motives he would have easily taken all these tribes along with him to create a massive army, and there is no doubt that the majority of people would have accompanied him. But he wished to avoid bloodshed. If Muslims started fighting each other, they would be annihilated.

As his caravan travelled further, their hardships increased. A rocky and barren terrain lay ahead. As soon as the sun rose, its scorching rays rained fire on them. There were no

signs of vegetation as far as the eye could see. Everyone's face became darker as the temperatures soared. The ponds dried up, the wells were parched. The heat was unbearable.

Whenever they came upon an oasis, it felt as if they had been given a new lease of life. They leapt madly towards the water. Their shields, swords and armour, burning up like live coals, were also immersed in the cool water. The horses and camels felt energised and once they were refreshed, they gazed longingly at the green grass. Then they continued their journey through this blistering, sandy earth. Distressed by the arduous journey, the children wept and wailed. Seeing nothing but sand stretching out before them for miles was unnerving.

One day, a doe was spotted. There were two bucks with her. She sprinted past them. The children began to clap with joy. This provided a brief reprieve and the children felt happy. The doe and her two bucks were seen several times and then, all of a sudden, they disappeared. The children were overcome by sadness.

"The doe has gone off to Kufa to give people the news of our arrival," Aun said to Muhammad.

"Yes, of course, and she ran very fast so that they can make all the arrangements for our welcome."

The children comforted each other with these thoughts. But when they went further on they saw the doe again. This time, she had only one buck with her and was looking really agitated. She started walking along with their caravan. Everyone was wondering about the other buck. When the issue was brought up before the Imam, he immediately ordered their caravan to halt. They set up camp next to a stream. The doe was still roaming around restlessly, close to them.

"What is the problem?" everyone wondered aloud.

"It looks like her other buck has been captured by someone and she's been following us, looking for it," said Husain.

"But we haven't touched the buck," the children responded.

"She doesn't understand this. She smelled a human and began following us. You all wait here. Ali Akbar, come with me. Let's see what the doe wants." But the children insisted on accompanying him.

Husain turned his horse towards the doe and she turned around and started following him. When he stopped, she also halted and looked wistfully at him.

"She knows the whereabouts of her buck, she wants to lead us to him. Let's see where she takes us."

"We'll lose time."

"But it pains me to leave the doe in this condition. We have to help her."

"Baba Jaan, there might be danger ahead," Ali Akbar said. "All of you stay here, I will go alone."

"Animals are not given to treachery. This is a quality that only the esteemed human species possesses. Come, there's nothing to fear. If a wild animal had devoured the buck, the doe would have accepted it eventually. I'm sure the buck has been captured by someone and is still alive."

The Imam talked about animals with the children as they began their search. Soon, they came to a settlement. The doe stopped in front of a house and tapped on the door with its hooves.

"By God's grace, how wise these animals are. Her buck must be in this house." The Imam stepped forward and knocked. A man opened the door.

"Who are you, sir?" he asked.

"I am Husain Ibn Ali, I'm on my way to Kufa. These are my children."

"O Husain, I had heard rumours about your journey to Kufa, but I never imagined that I would be so fortunate as to welcome you to my humble abode. Please give me an opportunity to serve you. I can't offer you anything except food. By chance I caught a buck today. I'll slaughter it right away and prepare kababs. I had thought that I would rear it till it grew into a deer and then use it. But he's a strange animal. Ever since I caught him I've tried everything, but he doesn't eat or drink."

"I thank you for offering us your hospitality, but we have a large caravan that awaits our return."

"My lord, this is wrong. Husain Ibn Ali comes to my door and I'm unable to serve him. How can I send him away from my door, empty-handed?"

"We will not leave empty-handed. If you want to give us a gift, then give us the buck."

"The buck is nothing, my lord. My life is yours, if you command."

The man ran inside and brought the animal to them. The buck immediately sprinted to its mother and began to suckle. The Imam's eyes welled up with tears of joy. The children started clapping.

"What is your name, my dear man? You have filled our hearts with great happiness."

After thanking him, Husain returned to the caravan. The children were overjoyed to see that the doe did not run away. She continued walking with them. Whenever they set up camp, the children played with her.

The caravan continued its journey. A great many people joined in along the way.

Kufa

Meanwhile, in Kufa, the governor shut himself up in his fort. He wanted to give everyone the impression that he was afraid of them. This emboldened people and they speeded the process of pledging their allegiance to Imam Husain.

When his informers gave him the news that two days prior to Hajj, Husain Ibn Ali had departed for Kufa and that his caravan was now on its way, the governor revealed his true colours. Soldiers were stationed at every corner of the city. Announcements were made that anyone seen with Muslim Ibn Aqeel, or caught giving him shelter, would be considered an enemy of the state, a traitor, and be subjected to the severest punishment.

At the same time, brutal violence was unleashed on the people. Homes of those suspected of being loyal to Husain were raided and set on fire, others were openly murdered. The attack was so sudden and vicious that everyone panicked and went into hiding. Those who had openly come out in support of Husain were either jailed or killed—they were hanged publicly in mosques as an example to all. Those who managed to escape death were presented before the governor, who informed these frightened and dazed people that they would be held accountable for the actions of the people in their neighbourhood. They would be answerable if anyone defied the governor's orders. Along with the traitors,

their families, too, would be subjected to death by slow and unrelenting torture.

When this sudden storm of violence was let loose on the people, they forgot their earnest promises and assurances to Husain and rushed into hiding. The borders of the city were sealed and no news could travel outside. The plan was to ensure that the Imam remained unaware of the changed circumstances, and continued with his journey. Upon arrival in Kufa he would be surrounded by the governor's forces and his entire entourage would be wiped out.

Husain's caravan advanced steadily towards death. When he arrived in Hajar, he wrote a letter to the people of Kufa and rushed it off with a messenger. It said:

This letter is addressed to my brothers in Islam from Husain Ibn Ali. After salutations and praise of God, I wish to state that I have received a letter from my brother, Muslim Ibn Aqeel. I am overjoyed to find out about your solidarity and strength of purpose. I pray that your efforts are rewarded. When you receive this message you should complete all the arrangements for my arrival and take care of all your plans wisely and with speed. I will be with you in a few days, Inshallah.

The letter was entrusted to Qais Ibn Musahir Al Saidawi who was instructed to deliver it post haste.

But the enemy had cast its net very shrewdly. The emissary was arrested at Qadisiyyah and taken to Kufa, where he was immediately executed on the orders of the governor, Ibn Ziyad. As a back-up, the Imam had also sent Abdullah Ibn Yaqtar, his foster brother and one of his companions, to meet Muslim Ibn Aqeel. But he, too, was martyred before he arrived at his destination.

When Husain left home, his caravan had been small. But along the way, as they passed through various settlements, many others joined in, especially those who were poor and indigent. There were also those who thought that Husain had been invited by the people of Kufa and that he would receive a grand welcome when he got there, and become the Caliph. They felt that if they accompanied him now, they would get a chance to lead a luxurious life in his court later on.

The Imam explained to them that this was wishful thinking. He was not going to Kufa to gain power. "And there are innumerable dangers that await me."

But they still felt that the Imam didn't really mean what he was saying and so they remained with him. The caravan proceeded slowly.

In the meantime, Ibn Ziyad came up with another scheme. He quietly left the city and organised his army in such a way that it looked like a caravan.

The Imam used to wear black while travelling. It was also customary for travellers to cover a part of their faces with the shamala, the lower portion of the turban, to protect themselves from sand and dust. Ibn Ziyad impersonated Husain and ordered his soldiers to conceal their faces with their shamalas. Consequently, when he entered the city, everyone thought Husain had arrived.

It was as if parched paddy fields were suddenly soaked in water. Everyone came out of their homes, dancing with joy. Those who had been in hiding felt confident and openly cursed Ibn Ziyad.

The governor continued to advance quietly. He ordered his soldiers to carefully identify Husain's followers who had come out fearlessly in his support. "Keep an eye on each one," he commanded, "no one should be able to escape."

As the 'Imam' and his army made their way through the city throngs of people fell over each other, chanting slogans for his safety and welfare.

When this caravan reached the mosque, Ibn Ziyad removed the shamala from his face. Everyone was stunned. They ran for their lives. But the soldiers killed every one of them. Most of Husain's sympathisers were either murdered or thrown in jail. The Kufa that was to welcome Husain became a graveyard. Muslim Ibn Aqeel took refuge in Hani Ibn Urwa's house. Everywhere there were spies looking for him. Several people were tortured but no one betrayed him. The truth was that no one actually knew where he was hiding.

Once again, a well-thought-out plan was set in motion.

A stranger was sent around asking for his whereabouts. "Where is Muslim Ibn Aqeel? I have a message for him." "What is the message?" people inquired cautiously.

"A friend of his has sent ten thousand dinars with the instructions that the money be distributed among government officials in order to help him escape."

Saying this, he took out the entire amount in front of them. People were convinced of his intentions when they saw that he was not making any false promises. Had he been dishonest he would have kept the money for himself.

A search for Muslim began. It was necessary to look for him for his own good.

"Leave the money and go and thank this benefactor. We will make arrangements for it to reach him."

"I'll leave right away and inform him that Muslim is well. I'll also secretly negotiate with the officials so that he can leave town without delay."

The moment this man left, soldiers raided the area, confiscated the entire sum of ten thousand dinars, arrested

and tortured all those who had offered to look for Muslim. But they still had no idea where he was hiding. No one was able to reveal anything.

Muslim Ibn Aqeel had already heard about the raids and had just managed to escape through the back door when Hani Ibn Urwa's house was stormed on the suspicion that he was hiding there.

Muslim's two sons had taken refuge in Qazi Sharih's home. He thought it would be best if no one knew of their whereabouts, they would be safe from violence if they stayed where they were. For the children, the alternative would be no less frightening than stepping into the cave of death. In the darkness of the night, Muslim Ibn Aqeel stealthily crept around the streets and alleyways of the city. He was weak with exhaustion. But he knew he was safe for the moment. No one had recognised him or paid him any attention. But, on several occasions, he had heard people talking about him, and he realised that his life was in real danger. However, the Imam and the people in his caravan were in greater danger. Muslim did not care about his own life. He only wanted to somehow get out of Kufa and reach the caravan and warn them of the dangers that lay ahead. It would be terrible if the Imam unknowingly walked into the cave of death.

In the dead of night he spotted a house on the outskirts. Consumed with an unbearable hunger and thirst, Muslim was so worn out and drained that he could barely walk. He had not had a drop to drink in the last forty-eight hours. He had been afraid to ask anyone for help. Death, with its jaws wide open, surrounded him on all sides. He thought, perhaps it was possible that the occupants of this house on the periphery may not recognise him. May not be aware of

the events that had been unfolding within the city, and it just might be possible that he would get to rest there for a short while.

He knocked cautiously on the door. An old woman opened it and peered at him.

“Who are you?”

“I’m a worn out, fatigued traveller. I will be grateful if you allow me to stay the night, I will leave before dawn.”

“You look weary. Where have you come from? Where are you going? I can’t see properly, could you move into the light so that I can take a look at your face?”

Muslim came forward silently. The old woman looked him up and down.

“You look like you belong to a good family. I’m drawn to your face, but I can’t remember where I’ve seen you. I’ve become senile. You had probably not even been born when I was young. Once, the Lion of God, Hazrat Ali Ibn Abi Talib passed this way. I too caught a glimpse of him at the time. I don’t know why, but you remind me of him.”

“I’m from his family, he was my uncle,” Muslim Ibn Aqeel said, his head lowered. After seeing the old woman’s reverence and regard, Muslim felt fear receding from his heart. “Husain Ibn Ali is my paternal uncle’s son.”

“Dear God, you are Muslim Ibn Aqeel? My name is Tou’ah, I’m a follower of the Prophet’s family. I’m honoured that you have come to my humble abode. Curse be upon those who have become your enemies. As an old woman my life has no real value, but no one can cause you any harm here.”

“I came to the city as the representative of Husain Ibn Ali. Circumstances have changed drastically and now the soldiers are after me.”

"A curse be upon those soldiers! Come inside."

She gave him water to wash and clean up, then she placed a tray of food in front of him. Later, she made up a comfortable bed for him.

"Stay here for as long as you wish. No one comes here. I have a grandson, but he too has no time to come and see me."

"I will rest only for a few hours and then leave."

Muslim washed his hands and face, drank some water, then swallowed a couple of morsels, gave thanks to God and lay down.

What a strange twist of fate! The grandson who rarely came to see her arrived unexpectedly that night. Seeing the old woman come out of the guest room with a tray, he asked, "Who was the food for?"

"A weary traveller. The poor man just ate two morsels. Come son, why don't you eat the rest of the food?"

"I'll never touch this chaff. I've just feasted on kababs made from the meat of a whole goat. Who is your guest? I hope he's not a thief or vagabond."

"He's a great man, you fool. But he is in trouble. He'll stay the night and leave in the morning."

"Oh, stop with this nonsense. I'm asking who he is, what's his name?"

"Speak softly, my son, he was so exhausted, he's just fallen asleep. He will wake up."

"If you won't tell me, I'll go and ask him."

"No, no, I'll tell you. My son, we've been blessed with such good fortune, a member of the Prophet's family is our guest today."

"Who?"

"Muslim Ibn Aqeel. My son, swear on my life you won't tell anyone."

“Why would I tell anyone? He’s not my enemy,” her grandson said slyly.

When the old woman fell asleep, he quietly slipped out of the house and ran towards the city to inform Ibn Ziyad. The governor gathered 25,000 soldiers and set out to arrest Muslim.

In the pre-dawn hours, when the old woman entered Muslim’s room with water for ablutions, she saw him sitting on his bed, drenched in sweat, looking extremely agitated.

“What’s the matter, my son, were you not able to sleep?”

“No, mother, I slept well, but early in the morning I saw a strange dream. My uncle, Ali Ibn Abi Talib, was standing by my bed and saying, ‘Muslim, get up, it is not wise to sleep so much.’ I woke up. I am late. I do not care about my life. My only fear is that Husain Ibn Ali is coming this way without any knowledge of the goings-on here. I have to inform him.”

After ablutions he began his prayers and that was when he heard the sound of galloping horses. The old woman realised that her grandson was missing. She immediately understood what was happening and struck her forehead in anguish.

“This is not your fault,” said Muslim, trying to console her.

“My grandson has betrayed the Prophet’s family! Oh God, my old age has been tainted, my lifetime of worship has been reduced to dust.”

“No, you will not be answerable for your grandson’s sins.”

Sending a contingent of 25,000 soldiers to arrest a single man was to show everyone that none of Husain’s sympathisers would be spared.

Muslim Ibn Aqeel was an expert swordsman. He got up from the prayer mat, got ready and then called out to the

soldiers, "I am alone, I am Husain's messenger, my murder cannot be justified by any means."

"Then put down your sword."

"No one in my family has ever put down his sword in front of anyone. This is my life, I will not dishonour it. You people should return and let me go."

"Then be prepared for death."

A barrage of arrows flew in his direction, but Muslim was safe in his room.

"Set the house on fire," the commander ordered.

"No, the house belongs to this old woman who is my benefactress," said Muslim, as he emerged with his sword unsheathed.

The soldiers did not expect such a daunting fight. Muslim went after them, slaying them, one column after another. But he was just one man up against a massive army. Unable to sustain his injuries, Muslim finally collapsed.

But before the soldiers could overpower him, around twenty or thirty young assailants suddenly appeared on the scene. Their masked leader, who was dressed in black, stormed the lines of soldiers. Despite putting up a brave fight the young fighters could not continue for long and soon all of them had been slain. When their leader fell from the steed his turban unravelled, revealing long black hair.

"Laila!" Muslim raised himself to cushion her fall. "What have you done?"

"I'm fortunate to be breathing my last in your embrace. This was my final wish."

Laila died in his arms. Muslim sat still, his head lowered. The soldiers were also stunned. Then he picked up his sword and set upon Laila's murderers with a vengeance.

He was vanquished and killed in no time. His body was bound with a rope and paraded through the city so that onlookers would learn a lesson. It was subjected to all kinds of indignities, then flung from the tower into a swamp where, some days ago, Hani Ibn Urwa's body had been dumped.

Tou'ah's house was burned to the ground. When her grandson arrived on the scene with his reward, he began throwing his weight around. But the soldiers had already started looting. They snatched his reward money and threw him into the burning house.

Two Flowers

When Muslim Ibn Aqeel's children heard that their father had been martyred and that his body had been desecrated, they clung to each other in sorrow and fear.

"What should we do now?" Ibrahim asked his older brother, Aun.

"First, we should leave Qazi Sharih's house because the soldiers will be looking for us. If they find us here, our hosts will get into trouble. We can't punish them for their hospitality."

They both went to the Qazi. The poor man was trembling with fear. He didn't have the heart to turn the children out, but he knew that the alternative spelled disaster for his whole family. When he saw them, he hung his head in shame.

"Please don't worry, we'll leave, you will not suffer at all," Aun said.

"I'm embarrassed, my children. I'm not afraid for myself, I worry only about my innocent children. I won't be able to save you, either. Who knows what cruelties these beasts will inflict upon you. Get ready, I'll make arrangements to send you away quietly with my son. He will ensure your safety. I hear there are many caravans leaving the city. You can travel to Medina to your uncle with one of them."

He called his oldest son and said, "Entrust these children to the leader of the caravan. Tell him, if they arrive at their destination safely he will be amply rewarded. These days

the world only cares for money, all consideration and compassion have vanished."

He wept as he bade farewell to the children, and sent them off with his blessings.

The Qazi's son took Aun and Ibrahim and cautiously made his way to the inn, only to find that the caravans had already departed. All that was left behind were clouds of dust and sand.

"Look, just follow the dust clouds and keep walking. If you move quickly you'll be able to connect with a caravan. If someone sees you with me you'll be recognised and all our plans will be ruined. You'll lose your lives and my family will also be wiped out."

"All right, brother, you have already done us a great favour. Don't worry, we will reach the caravan safely." The boys took their leave and started running towards the caravan.

The boys were nine and ten years old. They were gasping for air after all that running and couldn't get to the caravan, which probably had already gone too far, leaving behind only a trail of dust and haze. There were many such dust clouds. Maybe there had never been a caravan to begin with. Perhaps a storm had raged earlier, leaving behind whorls of dust and sand.

Tired, the children decided to stop and rest. Fearing for their lives, they hid behind some bushes. Dawn was breaking, soon people would be up. They could already hear the sounds of the azaan in the distance. The boys performed ablutions using sand and offered prayers right there.

People were now up and about. A few were talking as they walked past the place where the children were hiding. It was clear from their conversation that the search for the boys had begun. Qazi Sharih had been thrown into prison.

His son was trying to bribe officials to get him out. The children had been accused of grievous crimes. People had given up everything to look for them.

The boys fell asleep behind the bushes. When they woke up they found themselves surrounded by soldiers. They were taken to Ibn Ziyad, but he was busy with other important matters and so the boys were thrown into jail.

The jailor was a God-fearing man and also very old. He didn't understand political scheming and trickery nor did he care for any of it. Generally, crooks and thieves were held in this jail. He thought the children had been sent there because they had committed some minor mischief and were put behind bars to teach them a lesson. He thought they would be released in a few hours.

"So, children, you won't do anything mischievous now, will you?" he asked them casually.

"We haven't done any mischief," the children replied seriously.

"Are you trying to fool me? Tell me, what did you do? Did you steal fruit from the governor's garden, or did you pester his birds? You must have thrown sand into the clear water of his fountain. Or maybe you incited the horses in the stable of by throwing a stone at them."

"No, we didn't do anything."

"Hunh, if you didn't do anything then the soldiers are picking up young children for no reason, because they have gone mad?"

"Perhaps you do not know who we are."

"Who are you? Tell me?"

"We are the sons of Muslim Ibn Aqeel."

"Muslim Ibn Aqeel, may God's blessings be on him. He is Imam Husain Ibn Ali's representative. I'm like a prisoner

in this jail. I have no news of the outside world. When is the Imam coming? I want to go and pay my respects to him."

"Who knows what make-believe world this elderly gentleman inhabits," Aun said to Ibrahim. "The poor fellow doesn't know anything."

Then the children proceeded to give him all the details. They could not deceive the old man. Obtaining freedom by lying would not be right, they decided.

The old man heard their story and cried, "Oh God, where is this world headed? The Prophet of Islam has been gone only fifty years and people have already started violating his teachings."

"You will face calamity because of us."

"What greater calamity can befall me now? The world is coming to an end right in front of my eyes. Children, I have no one, I sit at the gate of this jail awaiting death. If my end comes, I will be free. Go, I pray that you reach the Imam safely. Pay my respects to him and tell him I long to meet him once before I die. May God grant me my wish."

The children left the jail and began wandering from one place to another. When they got the chance they would take a few handfuls of water, or eat some dates if they found any. Someone had pulled off their shoes when they were being taken to jail. Their feet were blistered from walking barefoot on the hot sand and rocky terrain. Their clothes, too, wore out soon because they were constantly hiding behind thorny bushes.

"Bhai, I'm hungry," Aun said to his older brother.

"Wait, we will soon find a date palm and you can eat your fill."

"The dates are not ripe, they taste bad."

"In a few days they'll ripen and become tasty."

“Bhai!”

“Yes.”

“I miss Amma.”

The older brother held back his tears and tried to distract him. The two were only a year apart.

“I also miss Abba.”

The older brother placed a hand over his mouth and said nothing.

“Bhai, are you angry with me?”

“No, no.”

“Then why don’t you speak?”

Ibrahim tried to hide his tears but failed. The two clung to each other and wept. When the younger one’s sobs turned to howls, the older brother placed a hand over his mouth.

Then both started talking about delectable foods.

“The kababs made at Qazi Sahib’s house were so fresh.”

“But the khurma that Amma used to make for us with milk was very good, too.”

“Well, almonds are delicious.”

“And white bread and cheese are nice, too.”

“With honey.”

“Your thirst is never quenched if you drink from your hollowed palm; how sweet the water tastes in a clay cup.”

Sometimes, when they were talking playfully like this, they would break out in laughter and then cower with fear. Children are so resilient. No matter how spoiled they are, if they find themselves in trouble they show greater restraint than grown-ups do.

They had walked some distance when they spotted a house with lights inside. In the front was a beautiful garden. They peeped in cautiously through a window. They could hear people talking and laughing.

The brothers thought they would go in when everyone was asleep. When it became dark, they scaled the wall and quickly climbed up a tree. From there they could look down inside the courtyard. The inhabitants were sitting on the floor with a spread of roasted goat and chickens before them. They were also drinking wine.

The children became stiff after sitting in the tree for long. The younger brother dozed off, the older one rested his head on his shoulder. He was also feeling drowsy, but kept rubbing his eyes, trying hard to stay awake. He was afraid his brother might fall down.

Startled in his sleep, Ibrahim suddenly started crying. Aun tried to stifle the sound by covering his mouth with a corner of his shirt, but to no avail.

A maidservant who was walking that way carrying fruit heard the noise and paused. She could hear the sound of sobbing. She took the tray of fruit inside and returning, tip-toed in the garden, searching for whoever was crying.

Suddenly, she spotted the brothers. Astonished, she came closer and said softly, "Who are you?"

Wide-eyed, they both stared at her in fear.

"Don't be afraid, come down. You'll break your hands or feet if you fall off the tree."

When they came down the maidservant was pained to see their condition. She took them to her room.

"Both of you sit here. I will finish my work and be back soon."

She locked the door from the outside and left.

A short while later, the kind-hearted woman returned with a lot of food.

"Here children, eat as much as you want."

As she fed them with her own hands, she wondered who their parents were. How thoughtless and cruel to abandon these beautiful, innocent children to suffer like this, to leave them in a state worse than beggars. Their clothes were in tatters, and it seemed they were not used to walking barefoot, they had blisters on their feet.

As the children ate they were thinking, *how kind this lady is, even if she informs on us and has us arrested, we wouldn't care.*

The woman was thinking, *Oh God, why this injustice! You bless those who do not care for children. I long for them and yet I remain deprived of this joy.*

She decided that God had sent these children for her. Now she would fulfil her longing for motherhood by raising them lovingly as her own. She applied soothing balm to their feet, combed their hair, and then put them both to bed, locking the room from the outside once again.

At night, her husband came home, looking extremely agitated.

“What’s the matter?” she asked.

“Two boys have escaped from prison! The soldiers are searching everywhere for them. There’s a big reward for finding them. Anyone who turns them over to the authorities will be rewarded handsomely. I have been looking for them everywhere. I’m exhausted now. God knows where they have disappeared, no one knows whether the earth has swallowed them or the heavens have devoured them.”

The maid-servant was shocked. “Whose children are they?”

“We should be concerned with eating the mangoes, not counting the pits. We shouldn’t worry about whose children they are.”

"They must belong to a rich family, that is why a reward has been promised. The parents must be so worried."

"You are so foolish, woman! They are the sons of Muslim Ibn Aqeel. Whoever turns them in will be showered with unimaginable riches."

"The father has been killed, now the blood of the sons will be shed. But what crime have the poor innocents committed?"

"Why should we care? The reward is my only concern."

"If I find them, I'll never give them up."

"What will you do with them?"

"I will raise them as my own children."

"What a fool you are, you can't say anything sensible. Death is waiting for these children. Who would want to raise the children that the governor wants to murder? If I find them, all our problems will be over."

"But you have no one to leave the money to. The children will grow up and support us in our old age. Please promise me that if you find them, we will raise them as our own."

"Be careful of what you say. If someone hears this, all hell will break loose. As it is, we are slaves, our lives have no value. The times of the Prophet are long gone. Slaves are treated worse than animals. If we get the reward money we can buy our freedom from our master."

"I refuse to buy my freedom with the blood of innocents."

"What is wrong with you today? Don't you value your life? Why are you talking such nonsense?"

"Whom shall I live for? God has not blessed me with children."

"All right, if you don't want a thrashing from me then go to sleep quietly. I'll leave early in the morning and resume my search. If I get the reward I'll find a better woman. Only

someone like me would endure living with a barren woman like you."

"You know that it's you who is responsible for this fate. If my son had lived, he would have been their age."

"Whose age?" the man was startled.

"These children's age."

"How do you know their age?"

"I'm just guessing... I don't actually know," the maid-servant said nervously.

"You are lying! Tell me, where are the children?"

"How would I know where they are? And even if I did, I would never give them up to a butcher like you."

"Well, don't tell me. Allah will help me."

"Allah will never help you, ask Satan help."

The man fell asleep. The maid-servant stayed awake. Fear had robbed her of her sleep. She didn't know what to do. Where could she hide the children? She decided that when her husband left home the next morning she would find a way. Finally, she dozed off.

In the middle of the night, Ibrahim had a bad dream and started crying in his sleep. The older brother tried his best to muffle his wails and calm him, but the sobs didn't cease. This was precisely the time when Satan roused the tyrant. Seeing his wife was asleep he got up and tip-toed outside. He saw the lock on the door of the other room and heard someone crying. He opened the door and was shocked to see the boys.

"Who are you?"

"We won't tell you. You will kill us."

"No, I won't kill you."

"Swear."

He made a false promise. When he realised that these were the very children who had a reward on their heads, he

was beside himself with joy. He thought that if the children made a noise his wife would wake up, and chaos would surely ensue. And if the master found out what was going on, he would take the boys from him and kill them himself in order to claim the reward. He would lose everything. So he comforted the children.

“Oh, I have been looking for you all day. Listen, do you want to go to Medina?”

“Yes, please take us to our uncle. You will be amply rewarded.”

“Get up quietly and come with me. The caravan is waiting for you, hurry up.”

“We should thank the kind woman who gave us refuge.”

“There is no time, and she might have a change of heart and not let you go. Come now, or else the caravan will leave without you.”

The man grabbed the children’s hands and left the house. He started walking hurriedly.

“Don’t walk so fast, I’m out of breath,” Ibrahim said, panting.

“Hurry,” the man said roughly.

“Where are you taking us?” the children asked, after they had been walking for a while.

“Be quiet! Don’t talk nonsense.” He was worried that someone would take the boys from him. All the thugs in the city were looking for them.

“Why are you taking us towards the river? There is no caravan leaving from there.”

“Come with me quietly or else you will be sorry,” he said harshly, dragging them along.

Children are very smart. Even a goat starts trembling with fear the moment a butcher’s hand touches its body. If animals can recognise death from a mere touch, why should

these children not have guessed this man's intentions? They began resisting him.

The man drew out his knife and threatened them. "Keep walking silently or I'll kill you."

"You're a liar," Aun said with resentment.

"You broke your promise," Ibrahim added with reproach.

The man laughed impudently and continued to forcibly pull them along. It was an isolated area. No one heard the children shouting. Having sensed what lay ahead, they began crying.

"Let us pray before you kill us," Aun pleaded.

"All right, say your prayers, but if you try to run, then..." he warned as he sat down nearby.

"We won't run."

The children carried out ablutions with sand, said the morning fajr prayer. They raised their hands heavenward asking for blessings and remained like this for a long time.

The man came forward with his dagger. The two brothers began arguing. Each said, "Kill me first."

"I won't be able to see my younger brother's head being severed."

"But I'm younger and my heart is weaker than yours. Let me die first."

"Ammi always said you should listen to your elders."

"She also said you shouldn't hurt the feelings of those who are younger."

The man shouted, "What is this squabbling? Do I have nothing better to do than listen to your nonsensical arguments? You are wasting my time. Come, I'll finish you both off at the same time."

Saying so, he attacked them. Ibrahim pushed Aun away and stuck his head out. It was severed in one strike. The man

leapt and caught the head and bagged it. Aun fell over his brother's body and wailed loudly. Another strike and the other head was also deposited in the bag. Like an expert butcher he then threw the two corpses into the river. There was still some life left in the bodies—they bobbed up and down, then they clung to each other as they were swept away by the current.

When the man arrived at Ibn Ziyad's court, this stone-hearted governor was shaken at the sight of the bloody heads of two innocent children. He trembled with fear, tears rolled down his face.

"My order was to bring them here alive, not sever their heads. I would not have killed them. I would have imprisoned them so that I could negotiate with Husain later. What use are these heads to me?"

He called a guard and issued an order: "Take this swine to the very place where he slaughtered the children, kill him, chop his body into pieces and throw them to the crows and vultures. I warn you, don't bury the remains of this vile man because the earth will not accept this filth. And take the children's heads and set them down in the river."

The guard dragged this reprobate to the riverfront. First, he gouged out the eyes, then he cut off the hands and feet and threw them away so that wild animals could feed on them.

The bodies of the two children were still bobbing next to a rock not far from the embankment. He gently lowered the heads into the water. The waves carried them toward the bodies. The river was twisting and turning with fury, the waves crested wildly. The guard felt as if the children were openly chuckling at human vileness, that they were laughing hard.

His hair stood on end, he started shaking uncontrollably. That man never smiled again for as long as he lived.

Along the Way

Unaware of these goings-on, Husain Ibn Ali was peacefully advancing towards Kufa with his caravan. The crowd had swelled to nearly a thousand men. People had come and joined the caravan along the way. But Husain was worried about the lack of news from Kufa. The messenger should have brought some information by now. The caravan moved slowly, but the messengers travelled on camels that could run fast. They had had enough time to go to Kufa and come back.

Abdullah Ibn Suleiman and Manzar Ibn Isma'ili had completed their Hajj and rushed to join Husain's caravan. Because he had women and children along with him, Husain was travelling slowly and cautiously. They were not too far from Kufa when they suddenly spotted a traveller approaching them from that direction. This was a cause for joy because finally a messenger was bringing them good news about the reception at Kufa. However, upon seeing the caravan, the rider changed course and went off in another direction. Everyone was surprised.

Abdullah Ibn Suleiman and Manzar Ibn Isma'ili became concerned and followed the man. When they finally caught up with him, they inquired about conditions in Kufa. At first the man lowered his head and remained silent. Then he said, "Muslim Ibn Aqeel has been murdered. His corpse was defiled and paraded through the streets. Hani Ibn Urawa suffered a similar fate. I have seen it with my own

eyes. Husain Ibn Ali's messengers, too, have been mistreated in the same way. My compatriots have betrayed him. First they invited him but when the governor threatened them, they covered their faces like cowardly jackals and went into hiding. How can I show my face to Husain?"

With this he took his leave.

Abdullah and Manzar went back and requested a private audience with Imam Husain.

"I have no secrets from these people. Say what you have to in their presence," Husain said.

"Did you see the man who turned around when he saw us?"

"Yes, I did. I have been thinking about him."

"He belongs to the tribe of Banu Asad and is trustworthy. He told us that Muslim Ibn Aqeel has been killed. The mood in Kufa has undergone a drastic change. The city is in the grip of fear and calamity."

Husain sat quietly, his head bowed. He had suspected betrayal on the part of the Kufans, but he had not expected such brutality from them. His sorrow at the martyrdom of his beloved brother, dear friend and faithful companion was greater than his disappointment at losing all hope. This was the first blow he had suffered since his departure from home.

"Please, we beg you, don't go to Kufa, especially since we have women and small children with us. Let us turn back, because we have no one we can call our own in Kufa. Not only will the people be reluctant to help us, they will not hesitate to attack and kill us."

The Imam remained silent.

"It's not wise to go to Kufa."

The Imam lifted his head and said, "You are right." Then he asked Muslim Ibn Aqeel's older sons, "What is your opinion?"

"We don't care if no one goes, but we most certainly will. We will either avenge our father's martyrdom, or we will join him. We do not want to go back."

"There is no question of turning back. In a way, all our paths have been blocked. What is there to live for if Muslim and his innocent sons are no more?"

"And moreover, the situation with Muslim Ibn Aqeel was different. If you go to Kufa, those who are heartbroken will support you, the people will rise again."

Despite hearing these encouraging words, Husain neither felt happy nor relieved.

He said, gently, "Even if we decide to return, where will we go? If we were safe in Medina, why would we have left? The city from where we received a thousand invitations has now shut its doors to us. Will the circumstances in Medina change now and can we be sure of getting refuge there? And we do not know what the events surrounding Muslim's martyrdom were. It is possible that there was a clash, that the people of Kufa came to his rescue, fought valiantly to prove their allegiance, but were unable to stand up to the onslaught by the governor's forces. If that is the case, then it will be selfish and insensitive of us to abandon the people of Kufa. If some were killed because of us, how can we abandon those left behind and run away? If they fought for us, it is our duty now to go there and defend them."

"But going to Kufa is like walking into the jaws of death. Our deaths will not help the people either."

"Friends! Everything you say makes absolute sense. It is true that the only way we can save our lives is by not going to Kufa. I respect your opinion. But I want to make it clear that no matter where I go, death will remain my fellow-traveller. I harbour no dreams of victory or triumph. I am

not travelling towards the glory of a throne and crown, I am going towards my death. For this reason, I want you to return to your homes."

On hearing Husain's speech, many men who had joined the caravan with great hopes slipped away quietly in the middle of the night. As they moved ahead, several others also parted ways. In the end, only a few compatriots remained, and they were the men who had accompanied Husain when he left Medina, men who were determined to live and die with him. Instead of feeling angry or disappointed, Husain felt a great sense of relief and satisfaction. He had wanted them all to leave and save themselves. His destination was death. He was making his way towards the place where he would be killed, because that was the only path open to him.

The Meeting

The night lifted its black chadar and departed. A new day shone brightly. The Imam ordered that water be stored in large quantities, all leather-skin bags, water-bags and water containers be filled. Well-stocked with water, the caravan resumed its journey. Hijri 60 ended and Hijri 61 began. It was the first of Muharram. Morning advanced towards afternoon.

Someone called out loudly, "God is great!" On inquiring, Husain was told that date palms had been spotted, which meant that they were now on the outskirts of Kufa. Everyone looked closely at the trees.

Abdullah Ibn Suleiman said, "I've come here many times and I've never seen date palms before. Something is wrong."

"Then ask someone with excellent vision to go closer and see what it is," the Imam said. Abdullah Ibn Suleiman walked towards the clump of trees.

"I spot the ears of horses. I think it's an armed contingent."

"Yes, you're right, it is an army. What do you advise?"

"We should pitch our tents and ready as many soldiers as we have. It certainly is the enemy's army and one should be prepared for all eventualities."

So tents were pitched and everyone waited vigilantly.

When the contingent came closer it became clear that it was Al Hurr Ibn Yazid al-Riyahi who was coming from the direction of Al Qudsiyya with his cavalry of one thousand

tired and thirsty horsemen. He, his men and the horses desperately needed to quench their thirst.

Imam Husain ordered his men to give their water to the men and horses until everyone was satiated and no one, neither horse nor man, remained thirsty. His directive was carried out right away. People came forward with cups and bowls, and all their goat skins were opened up. Slowly, the water-bags kept on top of the camels were also emptied out. Quenching the thirst of one thousand horsemen was no small feat.

Hurr and his companions had come to interrupt Husain's journey. They had heard the news that he was moving towards Kufa with an army of thousands. When they saw that there were only about two hundred men, they were silent, and after seeing the generosity with which Husain served the thirsty, the soldiers were speechless. They hung their heads in shame.

Everyone on this side was also silent. It was time for the noon prayer. Husain asked Al-Hajjaj Ibn Masruq to call the azaan. Lines formed as everyone assembled at its sound. Husain also appeared from his tent, dressed for prayer.

After offering words in praise of Allah, he said, "O people of Kufa! As God is my witness, I have not come here with any dishonest intent; I have come because I received an invitation from you."

"What invitation?" Hurr asked respectfully.

"You wrote letters asking me to come to Kufa, sent messengers saying, Ya Husain, in God's name, come to Kufa, we do not have an Imam, come and guide us, help us find a balm for our troubles."

"Forgive me, Ya Husain, we did not write any such letters to you," said Hurr.

Then the Imam ordered that the bags filled with letters be brought out. Once they were placed before Hurr, the Imam said, "See for yourself, I do not wish to deceive you. See with your own eyes."

"No one amongst us wrote these letters, nor are we familiar with their contents. Either someone has tricked you or it is the work of traitors. You don't know this, but they have all been dealt with and those who escaped have disappeared."

"In that case, if you are telling me that no one awaits my arrival in Kufa, I will go somewhere else."

On hearing these words, Hurr and his people averted their gaze.

"Anyway, let us offer noon prayers. Hurr, you will lead your army in prayers separately."

"No, you lead the prayers. We will offer our prayers behind you."

Subsequently, everyone offered their prayers together. After that Husain retired to his tent. Hurr too, repaired to the tent that had been pitched for him. Some of his companions came in and started a conversation. While Hurr means 'free', on this occasion he was bound by Husain's beneficence. He was speechless.

Later, after everyone had offered the afternoon asr prayers, Husain said to Hurr, "If the people of Kufa do not need me, then they are under no obligation to support me. In that case, I will head in another direction."

With this, he gave his orders for departure.

Hurr was now compelled to speak. He said politely, "I have been sent by the governor of Al Qudsiyya to intercept you and ... and take you to Ibn Ziyad."

"Hurr, let me go to Najaf. You will lose nothing by letting me go," said Husain gently.

“You are not to be allowed to travel to Najaf.”

Husain became livid. Colour rushed to his face. Restraint, after all, has its limits. The more courteous he was the more these people were taking him for granted. He said angrily, “Hurr, you cannot dare to threaten us or order us. We will go where we want to. If you have the courage, try and stop us.”

Saying this, Husain immediately urged his horse forward. Hurr followed him at once and stood in his way.

When young Abul Fazl Abbas and Ali Akbar saw this their blood boiled. Zainul Abidin was not well, but he too sat up. Qasim also came forward and they all drew out their swords.

“Wait, I do not want bloodshed. This is why I left Medina.”

Then Husain addressed Hurr. “These young men are hot-blooded, do not engage with them. But if you have come to take my life, then it is another matter.”

“We have not been ordered to take anyone’s life. You were travelling to Kufa. We will not stop you. In fact, we will accompany you.”

“No, we will not go to Kufa now. Our misunderstanding has been cleared. There is no one waiting for us there.”

“We won’t knowingly walk into the jaws of death,” everyone said in unison.

“You will not be allowed to go anywhere except in the direction of Kufa. And Sir, where will you go? You can’t go back to Medina because there are armies on their way to intercept you there. Wherever you go, you will find yourself surrounded. Can I make a suggestion?”

“Yes, of course,” the Imam said agreeably.

“I have been ordered to stay with you if you head to Kufa, or go back to Medina. If you choose a destination that is in

neither direction, then I will have nothing to report. I will maintain silence. This way, you will be safe from any trouble and I will be saved from any kind of blame."

"It is not possible for us to be safe from trouble. Trouble surrounds us from all sides. But what you say makes sense. We will head towards Al Qudsyya and Al Uzayb."

Husain's small caravan turned in that direction.

Hurr did not object. He and his contingent continued to march with them. On the way, Hurr said in a pained voice, "Sir, I beg you in the name of God, have pity on your life and the lives of your family and friends. If you do decide to go to battle, you will surely be killed."

"Are you trying to instil the fear of death in me? Just think, what more can you do other than kill me. Hurr, everyone has to die some day. There is no shame or dishonour in fighting death honourably. One's intentions should be pure. If one's conscience is clear, then there is no need to be afraid of death."

Hurr hung his head and remained silent.

The caravan continued its journey. Hurr travelled with them. As they neared Nainwa they saw an armed horseman riding towards them from the direction of Kufa.

Everyone stopped and waited for him. When he came closer he paid his respects to Hurr and the other officers but ignored Husain Ibn Ali. He had a message for Hurr from Ibn Ziyad. The letter said:

You are hereby ordered to prevent Husain from going any further. Strategise cleverly and direct him and his companions towards an area which is completely arid and barren and where there is no fortress for refuge. This messenger will stay with you to ensure that you are not remiss in carrying out this command.

The letter indicated that Ibn Ziyad did not fully trust Hurr. He was apprehensive of his lenient temperament. Or perhaps it was a custom in those times to not trust anyone. After all, a person who can be bought can also sell himself again for a higher price to someone else. Or he could suddenly develop a malfunction in the brain and be forced to make a mistake. Officers were encouraged to spy on each other.

Although he was convinced of Husain's greatness, Hurr was still a man of the world and he could not jeopardise his future by opposing Ibn Ziyad. Even if he was helpless and vulnerable, he couldn't defy Ibn Ziyad's direct commands. He wanted to stop Husain from proceeding towards the plains of Karbala, because that was where Ibn Ziyad wanted him to take Husain. Restraining his impulse, Hurr changed the direction in which they were heading. The messenger expressed his approval and the caravan kept going.

How frightening was the night. There was darkness everywhere. Nothing was visible. A desolate, brutal, friendless desert, barren rock, desolate hillocks, no sign of other humans, nor any way of discerning where the path to be taken lay. The roar of wild animals terrified the children, they hid their faces in their mothers' bosoms and wept uncontrollably. The mothers recited verses from the Qur'an and showered their children's faces with blessings. And what can one say about the heat! God help!

But the Prophet's family did not let go of their fortitude. There was no water in sight. Most of the stock had been depleted after it was shared with Hurr's army. If instead

of giving them water, Husain and his companions had attacked the thirsty soldiers they could have finished them off within minutes. But even the thought of doing something like this would have been abhorrent to the Prophet's grandson.

The sun's heat was punishing since daybreak. The air was still. Everyone was drenched in perspiration, the delicate faces of children were scorched in the heat, the horses were panting with thirst. At a time when even the animals go into hibernation, the Prophet's beloved grandsons were drifting in the desert, their hair matted with sand, the children sobbing and pleading for water.

"My lord, do you plan to kill my children from thirst?" Bano cried out to Husain from her palanquin. "My six-month-old baby who is still nursing, is weak from the lack of water, the other children's lips are also dry and parched."

"My dear Chacha Jaan," Sakina pleaded with Abbas, "I feel stifled inside the palanquin. Please take me in your lap. Dear God, let me inhale the cool air outside. How lucky you are, enjoying the open air, while we are shut in here, unable to breathe."

The children's pleas broke Husain's heart. At least inside the palanquin they were protected from the brutal sun. Indeed, pain and sorrow are the only legacies his children received from their father. The Prophet of God had shown the world the righteous path and, today, his family was enduring trials and tribulations at the hands of his people in the middle of these bleak deserts.

Hurr's contingent rode off quickly after depositing Husain's caravan on this hellish trail. There was no choice but to continue in the direction of Karbala. The enemy had him trapped.

The Imam looked out at the vast, stretching plain of Karbala. His heart overflowed with emotion. "*There, we have arrived at our destination,*" he said to himself with a faint smile. "*From here, we neither have to go forward nor back.*" The earth smelled of the grave. He reigned in his horse. Zainab looked at him fearfully and clutched her bosom.

"Why have you stopped, Bhai? What is this place? There is no habitation here, no village. For God's sake, please move on from here. I'm frightened. How can we stay here?"

"One can't go beyond one's destination, Zainab," Husain said.

"But my heart is pounding, the children are weary, Bhai. I can feel the stench of blood coming from this wretched earth. The sight of the vegetation here is frightening, the flowers prick the eyes like thorns."

"You are imagining all this, Zainab. This is the same place that we have often seen in our dreams, during moments of uneasy sleep. This looks very familiar. Look, ahead is the river, Alqamah, we will pitch our tents on its banks."

Zainab glanced at the river and shuddered.

"Oh God, is this a river or a mirage? Are these bubbles or human skulls floating in the water? Are these waves or swords clashing with each other? I cannot bear to look."

"You're tired, Zainab, when you have rested you will not feel so anxious," the Imam said, trying to comfort her.

"Bhai, why do I feel like this? For no reason I feel my heart sinking. Look how Asghar sobs. It's said that innocent young children can sense what lies in the Beyond. Sakina is cowering with fear, too."

"Be strong, Zainab."

“The sound of the crashing waves is breaking my heart. Oh God, who is this lamenting so loudly? Has someone drowned in this wretched river?”

“Your imagination is leading you astray.”

“Something tells me that if we stop here our lives will be in danger.”

“O, Daughter of Ali, if you are so anxious then the others will lose courage as well. It was in our fate to come to Karbala. Now we will be here forever. If the governor permits, we will set up residence. Let me find out who owns this land. Come here, boys, go to the neighbouring village and find out who owns this land.”

Some of the young men left to carry out Husain’s command.

Then Husain said to Ali Akbar, “Your aunt always imagines the worst. This is the same place where Baba pitched his tents many times. The long journey has tired her out. Do you know, this is sacred land. We will stay here and will bless it with such prominence that people will come here from far and wide to learn and study. A person’s actions can make a place great. If we act with valour, then angels will bow before this land in reverence. Islam will come to life here once again in all its glory.”

Everyone alighted from their camels and horses and started walking around. The sight of water revived their spirits. A mood of merriment rippled through the group. The air was filled with the musical sound of children’s laughter. The waves of the water leapt to kiss the feet of Husain, and were immortalised.

Husain placed his hand on Ali Akbar’s shoulder. “Ali Akbar, do you like this place?”

“It is a unique location, and as for the river, it seems to be flowing down straight from paradise.”

On hearing this praise from the lips of young Ali Akbar, the waves swelled with pride, the river tumbled along playfully, and the earth was blessed with the season of spring. Coming from paradise, the breeze rushed to the river and whispered that it was the chosen one,

*Rise up, you foolish one, good fortune awaits you,
Imam Husain comes to you to wash for his prayers,
Rise, you lucky one, and touch his feet,
You are about to receive the same stature as Kausar,*
Your dignity will surge,
Husain comes to bless your waters with good fortune,
His footsteps will tread on your banks,
Your name will be celebrated for centuries,
And you, blessed one, your name will be taken with
Husain's.*

Every particle danced with joy, the desert and the wilderness were transformed into paradise, the desert glimmered, and radiance burst forth everywhere. The river lavished sparkling froth at the Imam's feet, the waves sprang up to caress them. Good fortune spread through the land. Flowers bloomed wherever the Imam set foot, the blossoming buds burst into laughter, Karbala's fortunes rose higher than the heavens.

Overwhelmed with emotion, Husain closed his eyes and said, "It is such a peaceful place, the fragrance of the breeze is intoxicating, my eyes seem to be closing of their own accord."

The children were splashing noisily in the water. In the desert, splashing water over each other is considered a

* Kausar, the river that flows in Paradise.

sign of goodwill and love because water is nature's most beautiful gift.

"Abbas, have our tents pitched here. But first ask Zainab which direction she wants them to face. The women's tents should be set up some distance away from the river. People will be constantly walking by and it will disturb them."

When Abbas asked his sister, she said, "Why do you ask me? Pitch the tents where everyone agrees it would be best. Although Bhai is right, it is better that the women's and children's tents are not very close to the water or the little ones will want to stay in all the time. But don't set them up too far or we won't be able to see the water. The river is beautiful. The mind feels comforted just looking at its gushing warmth. But why then, is my heart sinking?"

"Abbas, tell the children to stop playing in the water, the air is becoming cooler now," said Bano.

"I cannot get them away from the water! Tell Fizza to show them her stick, then perhaps they will listen."

"Let them be," said Zainab. "Let them play a little while longer. They have seen water after a long time. They will come out when they are tired."

Husain Ibn Ali smiled and said, "How little one needs to live a happy, contented life. Being far away from our homeland and our home, we thought we would never find peace or comfort anywhere. But look, just seeing this river has wiped out all our sorrows, the pain of having lost everything has vanished. We do not need palaces. We will build small, simple houses, create a new settlement, cultivate gardens and plant flowers. A new spring will mark our lives."

“The mosque will face the river.”

“We should lay down the foundation for the school and library first.” Zainul Abidin had a great love for learning. He was unwell and yet his palanquin was strewn with books.

“We should first plan for a food market.” Fizza was concerned about cooking, about pots and pans. Everyone laughed.

“Abbas, you’ll see what a beautiful city we’ll build here. It is possible to turn forests and deserts into lush and fertile areas. We are only a handful of people right now, but soon others will begin to notice us. There won’t be a dearth of hardworking individuals and in no time, a peaceful city will be built at here.”

The tents were unloaded, tent canopies were unpacked, screens began to be hammered in, coils of rope were unwound. Forgetting all their troubles, the Prophet’s family started dreaming of a new world.

But in one instant these dreams were dashed.

Suddenly, clouds of dust rose from the north and enveloped the entire valley. People paused in the middle of their work to see what was happening. In the far distance, they saw an armed contingent advancing in their direction.

Abbas called out to his companions. “Be alert, comrades! We don’t know whether they are friends or enemies. There are some barbaric tribes that have made looting their occupation. But it seems like there are only a few of them.”

Then they spotted another contingent. The darkness in the forest deepened, the mountains and valleys trembled with the thunderous echo of war drums, the bosom of the earth throbbed with the beat of horses’ hooves.

The contingents advanced at great speed and began forming columns on the banks of the river, right in front of the tents.

Abbas called out to the servants, "Go and ask them what they are doing. What is this disturbance? We have set up camp here and these fools are forcing their way in, raising clouds of dust. Tell them to pitch their tents further away."

Just then, the commander of the contingent came forward and said, "Our armies will be camping on the banks of the river. Can you people move away and pitch your tents at some distance from this spot?"

"But does the bank of the river end here? You can set your tents further downstream."

"This entire area is under the army's jurisdiction."

"What do you mean? From here, all the way down the river?"

"Yes."

"If you like this particular location so much, it is all right, we will move. We will have to pull up our tents." Abbas was fuming but he restrained himself.

"This entire area belongs to the army. You'll have to move away from here. Our forces need a large space. There are ten thousand soldiers coming from Kufa, and several armies are expected from Syria and Rome. Other contingents from elsewhere are also making their way here, two thousand from one region, four from another. Space will be constrained. You people should set up your tents somewhere far away from here."

"How dare you, you wretch!! How you dare issue commands to us?" Abul Fazl Abbas was livid. "Who do you think you are? We can destroy you in an instant. Who are you to tell us what to do?"

"I haven't made up these orders, I've been commanded to convey this to you. I'm just passing on the message."

"You will regret engaging with us like this. Do not be misled by our numbers. Courage and bravery are what count. If we decide to fight, we can move heaven and earth. Do not clash with us or you will suffer. We will draw a line of blood down the heart of this river. Our tents will be pitched here and anyone who tries to stop us will be crushed."

Abbas' anger was well-known. It was as if a volcano had erupted.

The soldiers found themselves living through a bizarre experience. Their spears were raised, their swords were drawn, their bows had been strung with arrows. Yet, their heads were bent in shame and remorse, their eyes were lowered, their hearts were pounding, their bodies trembled in the presence of the loved ones of the Prophet. They silently cursed themselves. Even a lakh of them were simply a fistful of dust before the Prophet's family. They cowered behind their shields.

Such was the dread caused by a handful of tired and weary people, a dread that made warriors sweat with fear.

Hearing Abbas's voice, the others also came forward quickly. Everyone's anger was roused. Habib Ibn Mazahir reached out and strung an arrow on his bow. Abu Tamama and Ibn Sa'ad drew their swords, Qasim was incensed, Ali Akbar's brow was furrowed in anger, Zainab's innocent boys, Aun and Muhammad, also leapt to retrieve their swords.

The soldiers cringed in fear when they saw this. A huge army, one that was growing in size with every passing moment, flinched at the sight of just a few young angry men.

The children started crying when they heard the commotion. Trembling with fear, Sakina hid her face in her mother's lap.

Fizza peered out of her palanquin and called out to Bano, "O, Bibi, something terrible is happening. The tyrants are raising their spears on the riverbank. Abbas Ibn Ali is fuming. May God help us, who are these men who dare to provoke this lion? He's a picture of anger and fury as he advances towards them."

Zainab, who was still in the palanquin waiting for the tents to be pitched, was alarmed. She said, "Bhai, in God's name, do something! What is this? I am afraid there might be bloodshed. In God's name, stop these boys."

Husain Ibn Ali got up quickly and restrained his brother. "Abbas, my beloved brother, our goal is peace. We have come here seeking refuge, we have no intention of starting a fight with anyone."

"A relationship of peace and security with these criminals!" Abbas's entire body was shaking with anger. "We are on the path of righteousness, my lord."

"We have no right to shed blood. These people are the umma, the community, of our grandfather. It is not right to take the first step in this situation. Let it go, Abbas, they're foolish. You are the son of the Lion of God who was the epitome of compassion and benevolence. There is no comparison between you and these men."

"My lord, if we pitch our tents away from the river, we will suffer for no reason."

"We are in exile. For us, water and thirst is one and the same. God is everywhere. Force and coercion are not our ways. I urge you, in the name of the sacred soul of the Prophet of God, let it go, Abbas. But I must admit,

your anger has suddenly reminded me of Baba's might and courage."

Husain's voice choked with emotion as he spoke to his brother. Abbas lowered his head and tried to control his rage. His face changed colour as Husain spoke. The moon of the Hashemites shone through the dark clouds of anger and disappointment.

"What are these ignorant fools worth in front of your courage and the magnificence of your family name? If you want, you can destroy any obstacle raised by even someone like the great Iskandar. These men are not your equals. Can there be any comparison between a lion and a fox? All I want is that you move away from the bank of this river. I beg you, in the name of our father, Janab-e-Amir, do not allow these wretches to take advantage of you."

Abbas was silenced by Husain's heartfelt entreaties. When he heard his father's name, he trembled, looked down and suddenly, tears fell from his eyes. Husain held his beloved brother affectionately, embracing him as one would a child.

"Abbas, why are you so angry? Do you not have control over yourself? Oh God, how you tremble! And these tears? Have I made a mistake? Have I offended you in some way?"

"No, no, my lord, your command is no less than a command from God." Abbas fell at his brother's feet.

"Look at the poor man whom you scolded, look how nervous he is."

Husain turned to that agitated commander and asked gently, "Brother, what is the matter?"

"Ya Husain Ibn Ali, nothing is hidden from you. These are orders issued by the army. If we do not follow through, our entire division will get into trouble. We have been ordered to take over the riverbank from here to that side over there

and not allow any non-military persons to come near it. We are bound to obey our orders. Tell us, how is any of this our fault?"

"He is right, the poor fellow." Husain took Abbas by the arm, and walking away with a few others, said, "He's helpless."

"But this is completely unjust," Ali Akbar said furiously. "If we give in, the devils will gain more confidence. We have women and children with us. Staying away from the river will create problems. This is the river that Baba bequeathed to Fatima Zehra as a marriage gift, her mehr. We have a legitimate claim over it."

Husain said gently, "God is the keeper of all our claims. This river is for the comfort of all people. What is the harm, as long as we get enough water for our needs? The entire world survives on water, how can we stake sole claim to it?"

"But if we attack these soldiers without warning, we can easily get rid of them. Before the reinforcements arrive we will gain control of the river. There is no reason for us to be afraid of a handful of men."

Husain listened to Abbas quietly, his head bent as he contemplated what he was saying. Then he lifted his eyes, heavy with the weight of trepidation and sorrow, and looked at the zealous young men standing with him. Then he gazed at the impassioned faces of his senior companions, and said,

"It is my decision that we move away from the banks of this river and comply with the army's orders. We will pitch our tents where they want us to. We have no other recourse. I do not wish to pick a fight on such a trivial matter. My children, my respected friends! Do you see how our patience is being tested at every step, how we are being harassed, goaded? Traps are being laid in our path. First, it was Hurr's insolence, then an ordinary chief's uncalled-for behaviour.

All this is impossible to bear. The blood of our young is boiling, the restraint of our elders is at breaking point. Our enemies are waiting for us to lose our patience and start a fight with them. They think we are fools. But we fully understand their games. We will not be tricked by them. The murder of Husain will indeed be the murder of Husain. We will not allow them to disguise it as an accident or some mistake or a slip-up. My respected friends, my dear relatives, my destination is death, certain death. There is still time. If you wish to save yourselves from being killed along with me, then for God's sake leave me now and go away. These people will be happy to see you go, they will not resist your departure."

"Ya Husain, death by your side will be greater than a life of a thousand years. Even if you try to chase us away with a spear we will breathe our last at your feet. We will not desert you." His friends and companions spoke passionately, and Abbas fell at his feet.

"Forgive me, my lord, I'm a flawed human being. My resolve weakens easily and I lose control. I cannot attain the heights to which you rise. But, today, I swear to you that even if Abbas's body is chopped into pieces he will not utter a word in protest."

"It is not just you, Abbas, even I often feel that my power of restraint is diminishing. But I crush my ego. Denying our ego is our legacy. My courageous children, just remember, under no circumstances will we be the first to attack. History will be witness to the fact that we did not break our bond with peace and harmony."

"You are our Imam, our king, may God help us pass this test successfully."

"And what can your poor and dispossessed king give you in return for this loyalty? I have nothing for you but death."

"Uncle, if you are poor and dispossessed then why do emperors bow down before you?" Qasim asked hesitantly.

"You are right, Qasim, I am the world's richest emperor because God has blessed me with sons and supporters like you. Our kingdom has no limits. These elderly men who are more passionate and lively than the young, these young men who are wiser and more mature than their elders—I have everything that a victor needs and that is why emperors are forced to supplicate in my presence. Is there anyone brave enough to contest my army and win?"

Their tents were pitched about four or five hundred feet away from the river. The children were disappointed to see that they had moved so far, their joy was dampened. The dream of setting up a new and exemplary settlement was shattered.

The First Step

The young men who had gone on a reconnaissance mission to the nearby settlements came back, accompanied by a respected member of the tribe of Banu Sa'ad. They reported that on their way back they had faced danger at every step. Vast armies were making their way into the region. The inhabitants of the surrounding areas, afraid for their lives, were escaping to the hills to save their families. The most dangerous contingent was due to arrive from Syria.

"I thank Allah," Husain said, triumphantly.

"There are six thousand soldiers advancing from Al Qudsiyya, and Hurr's forces have also turned around and are heading in this direction."

"Praise be to Allah."

"Forgive me, Ya Husain, do you know why these armies are coming together?"

"I'm well aware that the armies are lining up against me."

"In such large numbers?"

"Yes. This is an honour for me. My murder will be no child's play. The entire Arab nation can rise to my call. This is what the emperor fears and that is why he is amassing such a large army."

"And instead of being worried, you are thanking God?"

"Yes. The more witnesses there are to Husain's murder, the better it will be."

"One large division alone would have been enough for a small group of helpless and vulnerable people like us."

"You are right. Just one brave soldier is enough to kill Husain. But even this vast multitude will not be enough to deal with the grandson of the Prophet of God. Look how my small army has struck fear into the heart of the emperor of Damascus. He is uneasy."

"Everyone prays for an enemy with a small army, you are the only one who can celebrate its large size," said Abdullah Ibn Saleem.

"The ones coming to fight me are not my enemies."

"Then who are they?"

"They are ignorant men. They do not know whom they are being asked to fight. Even the commanders will not know that I am their target. The ordinary soldier is like a puppet. He goes where he is ordered. Such a stupid soldier is not someone to fear. His very existence is pitiful. Remember the small army of the Prophet of God? Why was it triumphant? The soldiers were conscientious, they had faith in their principles, and that is why they were victorious."

"Will we also be victorious?"

"If I did not have faith in my victory, I would have given up in fear the moment these armies started arriving."

Instead of deriving comfort from Husain's words, people became confused and perplexed. No one except for his closest relations understood the true meaning of the word 'victory'. Perhaps Allah would send assistance from the Beyond, they thought, or armies of angels would arrive and reduce the enemy to dust. Or maybe something like Noah's flood would engulf them and only those whom God loved would survive. The sinners and the wicked would be destroyed.

“None of this will happen. My integrity and my commitment to the truth make up my army. My greatest weapon is faith, and your love and your loyalty, my strongest armour. All I truly wish for is that as many people as possible are witness to what happens to me and understand its significance. I want them to see the stains of blood on Yazid’s garments and always remember the deep red of this blood.”

Habib Ibn Mazahir began to weep. “Ya Husain, these are not tears of fear, sorrow or anger, they are tears of intense joy. By God, I feel proud of my good fortune. Now I know why Yazid is so terrified of you. May Allah protect us! What an epic battle it will be! I am beginning to comprehend the true meaning of this struggle. Husain’s enemies are naked and crippled, mentally. They have no rationale for killing us. The eyes of the Arab nation are fixed on the Prophet’s grandson. The ruling Caliph is desperate, he is losing patience.

“Because Husain Ibn Ali has refused to swear allegiance to him, his pride has suffered a blow, his caliphate is threatened. People do not have the courage to speak their minds right now but they are not altogether paralysed. They may be overpowered but, if not today, then tomorrow they will gather their scattered thoughts. Today, they do not have the courage to declare that Husain is on the path of righteousness, but Yazid does not trust what they will believe tomorrow. He wants to interrupt the flight of our imagination, he wants to imprison our minds. We are not willing to accede to this. And this is not in Yazid’s favour.”

The Second Step

When Zainab Bint Ali heard that Husain had bought some land from the tribe of Banu Sa'ad, she was overjoyed.

"I was feeling very anxious but now I am at peace. This desolate place is beginning to feel like home. How long can we live in camps? There should be some way to start building houses. For Sajjad,* it should be a house adjoining a library. My Akbar should also get a plot. There is no dearth of water here, we will plant a garden. Once these armies move on the area will be empty. The foundations should be dug right away. There is no shortage of wood and stone. I've brought along dates from home, we will plant the seeds ... it will be just like home ... But Bhai, look, the piece of land chosen for Akbar should face the river. I want to bring home his bride soon."

Husain said, "This land is not meant to be partitioned. Everyone will get what is needed. Who knows what is about to happen? And anyway, two yards of earth will be sufficient."

Zainab's heart sank. May Allah grant Ali Akbar a long and fulfilling life, may his enemies be the ones fated for two yards of earth, she thought. But seeing the worried look on Husain's face, she remained silent.

The children mourned the loss of the river for a while, then they forgot everything and started playing in front of

* Husain's older son, also known as Zainul Abidin. He was very ill and could not participate in the battle of Karbala.

their tents. The desert seemed to blossom in their presence, the playfulness and noisy frolicking of the little ones gave strength to Husain's sinking heart. So often people had advised him not to take children and women along on this journey, but life would have been so lonely without them. They were his support. No, there would be no danger to the children's lives. The enemy bore a grudge against Husain, but children are innocent. Islam has placed great value on women and children, they would not be harmed.

Whereas a simple, homely atmosphere existed in the camp, on the other side, armies continued to amass after access to the river was closed off. Unfurled banners fluttering in the wind could be seen for miles. There was infantry and cavalry as far as the eye could see. All night, contingents of soldiers kept moving in and by early morning, the area was teeming with the armies of the enemy.

The river, which had swelled with pride and vanity at the joyous arrival of Husain Ibn Ali, subsided dejectedly ...the waves sobbed and died down...the bubbles danced like ghouls.

What was so intimidating about Husain's army that made a massive army so nervous and tense, and call for reinforcements? In the evening, Ibn Sa'ad arrived with his division. Among his soldiers were Syrians and Romans who were as gigantic as elephants, and whose hearts held no fear of either death or God. Unsightly—with their furrowed brows and dark complexions—and despicable, they waved their swords around as they marched on swiftly. Accompanying them were the elite of Syria, dressed in elaborate golden attire, astride on strong Arabian horses, with multitudes of slaves and servants, and palanquins on camels packed with slave girls and handmaidens.

The plain of Karbala was reverberating with the beating of war drums that pierced the heart of the heavens.

The moment Ibn Sa'ad alighted from his horse, his servant quickly came forward with an umbrella. He cast a careless glance over the army, then asked, "Do we have control of the river?"

"Yes, Sir," Kholi said. "Husain's caravan arrived before we did. They had already pitched their tents. We pushed them back with great difficulty. Abbas was as enraged as a lion, ready to take us on."

"Why didn't you take advantage of the situation? With this matter resolved, I would have slept peacefully tonight."

"We exchanged words, and it seemed like the situation would offer us an opportunity, but Husain calmed everyone down and the matter ended there."

"Where is Husain Ibn Ali's tent?"

"That rust-coloured tent you see over there, that's his. The terrain is quite uneven, everyone is uncomfortable. They are also far from the river, even the breeze is not blowing in that direction. Last night they were very restless. The children were in a lot of discomfort and were crying and complaining."

"How many are there in his army?"

"It's hardly an army; it's just a band of men. The strong and the young can be counted on one's fingers. The rest are women and children."

"So the news we heard that he has a large army and that there would be a great battle, was false?"

"What army and what battle? Many people joined him along the way, but the moment Hurr's men showed up and they learnt the truth about Kufa, they realised Husain was not going to form the government, that he is, in fact, walking into the jaws of death, they gradually went their

own way. Now only his sons, brothers, nephews and a few friends remain. What will they eat and drink to build their strength? When the battle commences they'll be trampled under the hooves of our horses."

"How many soldiers altogether in our armies?"

"It's impossible to know the exact numbers, they are spread across over four miles. Every soldier is as strong as an elephant and an expert in the art of warfare. Who can stand up to us? Our army is massive. On the one side are the treacherous waves of the river, on the other, the unlimited numbers of cavalry. In addition, there are contingents of fighters carrying daggers and shields, thousands of swordsmen, and as many strapping, spear-wielding soldiers."

And all of them were intent on shedding the blood of the Prophet of God's helpless grandson. They had drawn their arrows and swords. This was an army amassed to frighten those who would stand up to support Husain.

Hurr was on his horse, surveying the goings-on. Secretly, his heart was reproaching him. What is happening!

Ibn Sa'ad smiled complacently and glanced at the river. The landscape had turned black with shields. Daggers were gleaming. The ground resembled a field of spears. He smiled arrogantly and said, "Another division will arrive by tomorrow night. I hope the Imam agrees to take the oath of allegiance after seeing everything. There will be no need to engage in combat then."

"There is nothing to indicate that Husain will go back on his decision. The same old pride is still there; he is not ready to take the oath of allegiance. He prefers to die."

"Now, tell me, what can one do about his stubbornness? We have no other recourse than to kill him by refusing to share even a drop of water with him. Let us then see how long he

will exercise restraint. How long will he remain obstinate when he's without water?"

One army after another was advancing in this direction, the commotion was intensifying.

From the fourth of Muharram, one restriction after another was imposed, but it was done quite cleverly. When the servants went to fetch water, they were told, "Water is being carried for the army right now, there's a huge crowd at the river bank, wait awhile."

The servants would get tired of waiting. In the end, after a great deal of snatching and grabbing some were able to take back a little water while others returned empty-handed. The water-skins were ripped apart in the forced pushing and shoving. People in Husain's camp didn't even have enough water to perform ablutions or bathe. Nevertheless, there wasn't a total restriction on water at the time.

On the fifth of Muharram, Abbas himself accompanied some of the companions and servants who were going to the river. The soldiers were filled with terror when they saw him coming. There were only a few men guarding the banks at the time so no one stopped them and they were able to bring back a considerable amount of water. But Husain understood that the enemy was getting ready to use an old Arab tactic; soon there would be severe restrictions imposed on water collection. While he did not expect such spitefulness from fellow Muslims, he was afraid this might happen, and for this reason, he ordered everyone to use water sparingly and judiciously. Not a drop was to be wasted. For one, they were in the desert and had to cope with the intense heat. One needed water to drink and to perform ablutions. There was no question of bathing. The guards stationed at the river were severely reprimanded for allowing

Abbas to take so much water. The watch was reinforced and orders were issued that, under no circumstances, should Husain be allowed any more water.

Fear seemed to have besieged the river as well and it was receding rapidly. The shore was polluted thanks to the indiscriminate activities of the soldiers and the water was no longer worth using. One had to wade right to the middle to get drinking water.

There was some water left in Husain's camp until the evening of the fifth of Muharram. It served his people for the whole day on the sixth, they had just enough on the seventh as well, but on the eighth of Muharram only a few mouthfuls were left. A small quantity had been saved for the children. The shortage of water began to be felt acutely. Abbas and a few others expressed the desire to risk their lives and fetch some, but Husain stopped them.

"That is what they are praying for, that we become helpless and engage with them. Then they will have an excuse. History will record that Husain created a disturbance just to get water and the situation got out of hand. Under no circumstances will I give them this excuse."

But from the eighth of Muharram the people in his camp began crying out for water. Their thirst became unbearable, except for their tears there was no moisture available to them.

The world knew that Abul Fazl Abbas was his brother, Husain's right hand man. Husain had trusted him explicitly. In the past, he had been offered lucrative official positions as a reward for abandoning Husain, but he had contemptuously rejected every bribe. But now the situation was different. He had a family. At this time, there was a severe water crisis in the camp and everyone was desperate.

Shimr was a cousin of Abul Fazl Abbas's mother, Ummul Buneen, and by that relationship he was Abbas's uncle. He planned a last blow at this difficult time. He had brought along amnesty papers from Kufa for Abbas and his three brothers, Jafar, Abdullah and Osman, so that he could use them at an opportune moment.

Shimr sent a letter to Abbas through a messenger. He wrote:

Why are you putting your life and your family in danger? Find a favourable moment and slip away with them. Come to me. I will make arrangements for your journey to Damascus where all the world's comforts and luxuries await you. Similar arrangements will be made for your three brothers. I have amnesty papers for all of you. Think of your old mother, and leave from there immediately. If something goes wrong, we'll take care of it.

When he read the letter Abbas began to shake uncontrollably with rage. He wanted to unleash his anger on the messenger that very instant, but restrained himself. He tore the letter into shreds and threw the fragments at the messenger's face.

"Go and tell your master that Abbas Ibn Ali spits on you and your world. We four brothers are not just Husain's brothers, we are his slaves, and we reject your benevolence. We will consider it our good fortune to sacrifice our lives at Husain's feet."

When Husain heard about this, he sent for Abbas and advised him, "Abbas, he has asked you to come, so why don't all four of you go and see him. There is no harm in that. Perhaps the visit might prove useful. Why not give everything a chance?"

"We cannot do this, Master. We will not be able to carry out this order."

"It is not an order, this is my personal opinion. My conscience is heavily burdened, as your lives are in danger because of me."

"I am forced to disobey you, it will not be possible for me to fulfil your wish."

"Please go for my sake, take Sakina with you, and Aun and Muhammad as well. Do not let go of this opportunity."

"We will not abandon you under any circumstances. Even the desire to save the lives of Sakina, Aun and Muhammad will not make me rethink my decision."

"All right, then, just do this much, go and meet him. Tell Shimr what you are telling me. This is my wish, please do not ignore it."

Abbas was taken aback. He lowered his head.

The four brothers mounted their horses and advanced towards the enemy camp.

Shimr's joy knew no bounds. If Abbas could be broken, then how much strength would be left in the rest of them? Husain would soon be left all alone. When Husain's brothers receive rich rewards from the court, the impression that people have about Husain's uprightness will be diminished.

When the four brothers were handed over their amnesty papers, they immediately tore them up.

But Shimr did not get upset. He laughed and said, "It's up to you. You can seek my protection whenever you wish to, I'm yours."

In the meantime, Shimr resorted to another trick. He spread the rumour in Husain's camp that Abbas had joined the enemy's army. The moment his wife heard this she broke

into violent sobs. Husain went to comfort her and explained the situation.

"Don't be upset, my dear. Not a hair on Abbas's head will be harmed and all of you will be saved."

On hearing this, Abbas's wife's sobs grew louder. "Your brother has gone; it is between him and his conscience. But after this I will consider myself a widow and my children, orphans. Alas, he has gone to make a compromise with my brother's murderers. If this indeed is true, then may God never show me his face ever again."

The youngest sister-in-law, who respected Husain as a daughter-in-law would and who had never had the audacity to raise her head and address him directly, was now speaking loudly, her face flushed with anger.

"No," she continued, "I do not want such a marriage. He is your beloved brother, you will make excuses for his treachery. Cursed be the life that has been bought with the blood of a noble brother, who is a father-figure."

She was speaking passionately and Husain was trying to explain to her, "To see you in such dire straits is wounding my soul. I am not asking for your permission or giving you advice, I am ordering you. Take pity on your young children—they can live and they should be allowed to live."

"Please forgive my impertinence, but can I say something?"

"Yes, yes, anything, to save you and the children."

"You are not just Abbas's master, you are mine, too. If I ask you, on what condition will you agree to take the oath of allegiance to Yazid, what will your answer be?"

The Imam lowered his head and said nothing.

"Then how can you order us to ignore our duty?"

She was so absorbed in speaking passionately to Husain that she didn't notice Abbas who had lifted the tent's curtain

and come in. The Imam's eyes met his brother's and he looked down, but his heart sang with joy. "By God, not for one moment did I think that Abbas would abandon me. I was just trying to comfort myself by thinking it might happen. No, no Abbas's presence is more precious to me than water itself."

"I, too, did not believe that the son of the Lion of God could falter. This news is completely false. I knew if my husband has not returned then he must have been arrested."

"The man who can arrest Abbas has not yet been born," Abbas said.

His wife was startled. She turned around. She wanted to run into his arms, but held back due to the Imam's presence.

"So many years of being together, and I am surprised that my wife can make a mistake in judging me."

"No Abbas," Husain said. "It's not this unfortunate girl's fault. I was testing her. My heart is filled with strange emotions. I wish you could somehow be saved, but then the thought of you leaving me drains the strength out of me. These are the contradictions of human nature."

After the Imam left, Abbas drew his wife into his arms. "I didn't know my beloved is so courageous. You gave our master a beautiful reply. My heart danced with joy... but there are times when I wish I could take you somewhere safe."

"There is no place safer in the world for me than here, in your arms. But what was I thinking? I doubted your intentions."

"That was because of the love you carry in your heart for our master, which is no less than my love for him."

For a while they forgot that this was a battlefield, that the enemy had surrounded them from all sides, holding up spears. In their world, at this moment, it was just the two of them.

The Last Candle

The ninth of Muharram brought such devastation upon Husain's family, may God keep them under his protection! The children no longer had the strength to cry. They stared with vacant eyes, ran their tongues over their parched lips and then fell back in exhaustion. Bano's milk had dried up. The six-month-old frail and innocent baby, Asghar, lay in his cradle, drained and weak from thirst. Abbas's beloved child was panting from thirst; Sakina had been sobbing and was still cringing in fear. Outside their tents, it was raining fire.

As soon as evening fell, Ibn Sa'ad began preparations for the battle, and then he attacked Husain.

Having said his afternoon prayers, Husain had been kneeling at the entrance to his tent, his head resting on his knees, his weight on his sword, lost in thought. He was drowsy because he was tired and weak from thirst.

The attack was sudden. Ibn Sa'ad strung an arrow on his bow, and aiming it towards the tents of the family of the Prophet, he cried out, "People, remember, it is I who has shot the first arrow."

Everyone effusively praised his manliness and bravery. The plain of Karbala reverberated with the thundering gallop of the horses.

Zainab heard the pounding of hooves and cried out, "Bhai, we have been attacked!"

Startled, the Imam opened his eyes and comforted his sister.

"Be calm, Zainab, this is not the time to get agitated. Just now, when I dozed off for a moment, I saw a dream in which Naana Jaan was standing before me and asking, 'Husain, when are you coming to me?'"

Zainab covered her face with her hands and began to weep. Abbas also arrived. "What is your command, Master?"

"My dearest, may you live long. Go and ask these people why this unannounced attack, and that, too, on the tents of women and children. This is not a custom practiced by the Arab nation. They could not declare war openly and launched an attack without any warning?"

Abbas took twenty horsemen with him and rode off in the direction of the enemy. The forces halted their onward march as they saw them approaching. They thought that perhaps Abbas was bringing a message of reconciliation. No one really wanted to be a part of this fight. What kind of a battle was this? Thinking this might be an excuse to make peace, they halted the attack.

"What do you want?" asked Abbas.

"Amir Ibn Ziyad has sent orders that we demand that Husain Ibn Ali Ibn Abi Talib swear an oath of allegiance to the Caliph. If he refuses, then there's no point in wasting time and causing a delay. The decision has to be made immediately."

"Be patient. I will take your message to my Imam and return soon with a reply."

Abbas rode away at full gallop. Those who had accompanied him stayed back. A conversation ensued.

Habib Ibn Mazahir said to this group of top military officers, "What are you doing? You are planning to slay the beloved grandson of the Prophet of God? Think about it seriously for a minute. Husain is a righteous man of Allah, he possesses innumerable qualities, he is upright and abstinent. What is the crime for which you are planning to murder him?"

"He refuses to take the oath of allegiance."

"There's no crime in refusing to take the oath of allegiance. Swearing allegiance implies freedom of choice, those who wish to take the oath can, and anyone who doesn't may refuse. Earlier, this was the way things were done. There have been many who have not taken the oath of allegiance but they were not attacked or punished."

"We don't know anything, we're soldiers, not politicians," the officers said hesitantly.

"The Caliph has the allegiance of the majority," Omar Ibn Sa'ad said.

"If the majority is with the Caliph, then why is he insisting on securing Husain's allegiance?"

"Why are you asking us this question?"

"Because the swords that have been raised against Husain are in your hands. How will you show God your face in the afterlife?"

Urwa Ibn Qais said impatiently, "Habib, you never had any real interest in Ali or his descendants. You belong to the Osmani alliance, why then are you putting your life in danger for Husain? You used to think like the people of Syria. What has caused this dramatic transformation?"

"Now that you mention it, I do realise that indeed I neither had great devotion for Husain nor did I harbour any enmity towards him. I didn't write letters advocating

his departure nor did I ever think of raising my voice in his defence."

"Then what is the reason for this reversal?"

"I met him on the way. Seeing him, I was suddenly reminded of Rasulullah. How much he loved Hasan and Husain, and when Husain told me how circumstances had turned so viciously against him, I couldn't bring myself to stand by quietly while the grandson of my Master suffers in the desolation of the desert. Then, when Husain asked me to join him, I couldn't refuse, and happily agreed to accompany him. That is all. It's a short and straightforward story."

"But we have heard that instead of building an army, Husain convinces those who want to be with him to go back. Why would he ask you to stay on with him, especially since, forgive me, you are old and won't be able to perform any remarkable feat?"

"Yes, you are right. But there must be some wisdom in his request. And as for my age, if Husain had felt that I was of no use, why then would he have brought me along with him? I believe there is a very good reason he has picked me. But anyway, do not worry. Even at this age I can defeat a strong and crafty soldier like you."

"Oh no, at your age, you should devote yourself to peaceful worship."

"Sacrificing one's life for a man such as Husain is, in itself, a supreme act of worship. Not taking action when the rights granted to everyone by God are being mercilessly taken away by a wicked and sinful person, is a sign of cowardice and incompetence."

This conversation was still in progress when Abbas returned.

"The Imam asks for a reprieve for the night. He has said that when the day dawns you can do as you wish, you have the right."

Shimr Ibn Ziljaushan had been instructed to spy on Omar Ibn Sa'ad and take action against him if he felt there was even the slightest slip-up. Omar Ibn Sa'ad couldn't bear to look at him. In order to make a show of his loyalty, he had been trying to oppose Husain with the most exaggerated sternness so that Shimr would not report to Yazid that he had a soft spot for the Prophet's family. He was worried about his future. An emperor who acquires sovereignty with the help of traitors can never trust these men. Such people regard their friends and companions as weak. They believe that power can only be enforced through deception and treachery. All they see around them are traitors and self-seeking men. A person suspected of even the slightest transgression is immediately murdered, or else appointed to spy on others and keep an eye on everything they do.

This is how brother turns against brother. Spying makes it possible to achieve power and a high rank. Shimr had been appointed to oversee Omar Ibn Sa'ad and, in turn, there were other evil oppressors stationed above him. This continued all the way to the highest echelons of the court. Under these circumstances Husain Ibn Ali's existence amounted to nothing.

In order to keep Shimr happy, Omar Ibn Sa'ad always sought his opinion so that if, by any chance, he was implicated in some intrigue Sa'ad could bring Shimr down with him.

When Imam Husain asked for a night's reprieve, Omar Ibn Sa'ad asked Shimr, "What do you think, Shimr?"

"We will have to grant him the deferment. The Arab nation doesn't refuse protection to those who ask for it. It's not our custom to refuse a night's postponement. Even if a non-believer were to ask for a delay, we would have to give it. This, after all, is the Prophet's grandson."

So, a night's reprieve was granted and the advancing army heaved a sigh of relief and retreated.

But everyone was baffled. Why had the Imam requested this deferment? Was he expecting a contingent from somewhere?

Husain Ibn Ali had set aside his dignity and requested a night's delay from the tyrants not because he was expecting military assistance from somewhere or was planning to issue some special instructions to his small army. All he wanted to do was to spend his last night with friends and family. He knew he would not get such an opportunity once the battle commenced.

Night, the queen of darkness, arrived weeping at the unspeakable condition of the Prophet's family, lamenting, her hair open and spread about her shoulders. A cry echoed in all directions: "*The night of Husain's martyrdom has arrived.*" The esteemed Amir's spirit, parched and agitated, wandered through the plains of Karbala. The air was filled with melancholy. What agony and distress the Prophet's family suffered on this night! Such a night one would not wish even upon one's enemy. Sorrow and anguish tarnished the moon's countenance ... the stars were like lightless, dead eyes ... the celestial nymphs and sprites mourned, may God never again bring a night such as this.

Clouds of grief and dread hung over the tents of the Prophet's family. The atmosphere was heavy with gloom.

A windstorm raged violently. Lamps were flickering. Sand rose up in all directions. Terrified by the sound of wild animals young children huddled in their mother's laps. Every moment seemed like their last, as if they would die of fear. The women, silent, holding back their tears, tried to comfort the children, reciting prayers as they bent over them, to keep them safe from harm.

The one who was most agitated was Zainab Bint Ali. From early in the evening her face had been drawn, tears streamed continuously from her eyes. Distraught, she seemed to be drowning in sorrow. She would sit up with a start, then collapse in exhaustion. How can one not feel pain if knives are slashing through one's heart?

At this time, Husain's friends, companions, nephews, from both his father's and mother's side, along with his sons, were gathered in his large tent. Those who could not find a place inside were either standing or sitting outside. All the screens of his tent had been lifted. On one side of Husain stood Ali Akbar, and next to him on the other, was Qasim Ibn Hasan. Abbas's younger brothers, Jafar, Abdullah and Osman were sitting cross-legged on the floor, with Aun and Muhammad seated next to them. Abbas himself sat on his knees respectfully, before Husain.

One by one everyone swore fealty to Husain. Imam Husain cast his eyes lovingly over all his friends and relatives. His drooping face suddenly bloomed like a fresh, new blossom.

"History will bear witness, that never before have friends as loyal as mine and relatives as loving as mine gathered like this in one place. Today, seeing you all near me, I marvel at my good fortune. I hold my head high with pride. I have

no words to express my gratitude. There is no greater army for me, no greater weapon, than your loyalty and your love."

Then Husain ordered that all lamps be extinguished. There was darkness everywhere. Only the Imam's voice continued to light up the silence like a glowing beacon.

"What you are giving me at this time is invaluable. Only God can pay this debt for me. Until now, I had held onto a faint hope that matters would not deteriorate to this extent, that I would not be compelled to leave the world so soon after being forced to leave my home. I thought I would be able to live out my life like a peaceful citizen in some unknown corner of the world. But even that hope is now gone. So I rescind all the promises and pledges you had made to me, I release you from the burden of submission and gladly give you permission to go wherever you wish. It is night, darkness prevails everywhere, take advantage of this opportunity, prepare your conveyances and leave before dawn breaks. Let each one hold the hand of one of my relatives and depart in different directions, to different cities. These people are thirsty only for my blood, if they have me they will not come for you. Dear ones, I have snuffed out all the candles so that no one is able to see anyone. Your deference will not stand in your way."

The silence in the room remained unbroken. There was not a rustle, not even an indication that anyone had fidgeted. Only Husain's heart was beating. The sound of breathing had also been stilled. The Imam closed his eyes. With trembling hands, he lit a candle.

In the light of this last candle that the Imam lit with his own hands for the last time, he saw that every man was still in his place. No one had moved.

There was complete silence in the tent. The intensity of emotion left everyone tongue-tied. Then Abbas spoke on behalf of the family.

“God forbid that we should be alive after you are dead.”

Then Muslim Ibn Auhsaja said, “O Husain, I swear in the name of God, this will not happen. Your enemies are my enemies. As long as there are arrows in my quiver, a spear and sword in my hand, I will fight these villains. If my weapons become ineffective, I will pelt stones at them. Even if I’m slain seventy times and brought back to life, and my body is burnt alive, and my ashes scattered in this isolated desert, I will fight your enemies. I will not abandon you. None of us values our lives more than we value you. Running away from this battle is like fleeing from one’s conscience. Please don’t compel us, we will not obey your order. And the thought that we are disobeying our dearest friend and master, is unbearable to us. Please remove this restriction that you have imposed on us.”

Tears began to flow from the Imam’s eyes. He stared silently at the candle, the last one he would light in this lifetime. Its light increased steadily like that of the rising sun.

“My dear ones, this is no longer my battle, it is our battle. Whatever happens, happens to all of us. Today, we are not separate individuals, we are a single strong resolve, we are an enduring faith, we are the centre of light, like this candle here. In the end, victory will be ours.”

Then he embraced everyone present, one by one, and said, “Come, let us talk to the youngsters now.”

And the candle continued to glow!

The Last Night

Husain became extremely distressed when he heard sounds of lamentation from the women's tents.

"It is Phupi Jaan," Ali Akbar said with restraint. "She has been really agitated from some days now, but today she is extremely troubled and tense. She dozed off for a short while, and God knows what kind of dream she saw because she woke up with a start, started weeping, and ever since then she has been pacing slowly, barefoot, with her head uncovered. When I asked her, 'Phupi Jaan, what is the matter?' she rested her head on my shoulder and began to sob. She said, 'My child, pray that God takes me before I suffer the sorrow of losing my brother. I pray that someone takes my life, and I pray my brother lives long.' Ammi Jaan is also distraught, her tears flow unceasingly. Baba, please go and comfort her, she will feel reassured when she sees you."

The Imam immediately went to the women's tents.

On seeing his sister's drawn face, drained by thirst, Husain became despondent. This was the same five-year-old girl who had clung to her brothers dejectedly at the passing of their mother.

The moment she saw her brother, all Zainab's sorrows seemed to fade away. She ran and fell at his feet. Her brother lifted her and held her to his bosom.

"O, Daughter of Ali, what have you done to yourself? Head uncovered, hair all dishevelled, layers of dirt on your

face—have you already started to mourn for me? I am still alive. When the time comes to weep, you can cry to your heart's content. If this is how you feel right now, then how will you bear the pain when my throat is slit with a dagger?"

"My dear brother, I feel delirious, as if I am suffocating. I feel like I am dying but death does not come to me."

"Do not fret; the day has yet to dawn. Keep your faith in God, Zainab. If death is in my fate, then nothing can prevent it. Perhaps some assistance will come to us from the Beyond. Why are you so sure that your brother will be killed?"

"May your misfortune befall me instead, may Allah protect you from all calamities. I wish upon myself all the troubles that are meant for you, and may I be the one to die. May Allah prevent me from seeing your children become orphans and Bano a widow."

"If you are so distressed, then my children will be lost. They are so close to you, they depend on you. If you give up, they will not be able to survive this ordeal."

"I try hard to remain calm, but I cannot control my anxieties. All kinds of fears assail me, all kinds of misgivings rear their heads. May your enemies be doomed! Whenever I think about being separated from you, this house that is so full of people suddenly appears desolate. Every moment I hear death rustling its feathers. I feel as if someone is coming to bind my wrists with ropes, some ill-mannered, shameless person is pulling the chadar off my head. If I doze off even for a minute, I see our grandfather looking anxious and apprehensive. I see Amma Jaan, her head uncovered, weeping bitterly. She says to me, 'O daughter, how can you sleep so peacefully when death is circling over my beloved son's head? He will live for this one night only; this is your

love for your brother?' For many days now Baba Jaan has been appearing in my dreams, his robe drenched in blood, his forehead covered with the perspiration of death. He says to me, 'Zainab, wake up, you are not fated to sleep, and when Husain falls asleep, do not sleep even then.' Startled, I wake up. I'm afraid to even blink now."

Brother and sister were in the midst of this exchange when Sakina suddenly came in, looking for her father.

"Baba Jaan, where did you go? I can't sleep without you. The whole world is asleep but your Sakina stays up, she's still awake when the morning star rises. Please, Baba Jaan, help your Sakina to sleep ... I don't know where sleep has flown. Sand irritates my eyes and I can't close them. If you have finished talking to Phupi Jaan, then please hold me in your lap for a little while."

The Imam picked up the trembling, shivering little girl and held her close to his chest.

"My little nightingale, how beautiful your voice is, honey drips from your lips. Why can't you sleep, my precious one?"

"Now that I am in your arms, I'm feeling drowsy."

"But, my dearest one, this is not a good habit. You should sleep with your mother sometimes."

"Amma has no time for me, she paces all night with Asghar in her arms; he never stops crying."

Husain felt as if someone had punched him in the chest, but he restrained himself and said, "Then you must try to get into the habit of sleeping on your own."

"No, I will sleep with you."

"But if I am not there, how will I hold you against my chest and put you to sleep?"

"Are you leaving me?"

"If I have to go, then yes. You are grown up now, you understand. Years of togetherness can suddenly vanish, caravans are looted and scattered. When I was separated from my mother I, too, was very young. I used to snuggle up next to her, or I was unable to sleep. When she left us, no amount of crying or lamenting helped. She had to go, so she went. No one's mother and father live forever."

"Children also die, so I will simply die."

The Imam was silenced.

"If you do not let me sleep with you, I will stay awake until I die."

With these words, Sakina dozed off in her father's lap. Husain took her to Bano's tent.

She saw the Imam and stopped pacing. If he had not held her she would have fallen on the sand with the baby. She put the infant down in the cradle and extended her arms to take Sakina from the Imam.

"Give her to me. She will tire you out."

"No, when will I have the chance to be tired like this again? Believe me, when you hold your child in your arms the whole world's weight falls off your shoulders."

"She does not sleep at my behest. It is the magic of your embrace that has made her doze off."

"She is not in deep sleep yet." Husain sat down with Sakina snug in his lap. Asghar started whimpering again. His mother picked him up. Husain put Sakina down on the bed and took the infant from Bano. How light he was, a flower that was slowly shrivelling. Husain's hands began to shake. The baby stopped crying the moment he was in his father's arms. Bano placed her head on Husain's shoulder and sighed deeply.

"Bano take these two small children and leave. Go away from here, go anywhere. Take Jaun* and Fizza with you."

"You come with us, too," said Bano naively.

"How can I leave? These armies have been readied for battle just to take my life."

"And your children? Do you think they will be allowed to live? Especially these two, the offspring of your later years. Just think, what will Asghar believe when he grows up? That his mother abandoned his father when death was at the doorstep and escaped? What will I say to them then? And also, if you are the son of the Lion of God, then I am his daughter-in-law. Your path is my path, you will not find me lacking in any way."

When the infant was asleep, Husain put him down next to Bano.

She said, "My children are so young but they have already lost their innocence. Sakina has just turned five, but she talks like a grown woman. I told her, my princess, don't cry, and she said, 'I don't want to cry, these tears flow out on their own. Why does Baba not come, why do tears come? I don't like these tears, they don't stop even when I close my eyes. They are afraid when they see Baba ... but Baba doesn't come, I know why he doesn't come.' I asked her, why doesn't he come? And she replied, 'He gets sad when I ask for water, that's why he doesn't come. If my crying disturbs you, then I'll cry quietly.' When I hear her talk like this, I feel scared. Such perceptive children don't live long."

The Imam returned to his tent with a heavy heart.

* Jaun was a Christian freed man who travelled with Husain. He died in the battle at Karbala.

Qasim Ibn Hasan was questioning Abul Fazl Abbas about something, but as soon as they saw the Imam they stopped.

One by one, the Imam spoke with all those who were present, about the pleasant moments spent in the past, the happy past, the joyful times when his grandfather was alive.

Meanwhile, Qasim continued to look at his uncle with questioning eyes. It seemed as though he wanted to ask him something, but couldn't pluck up the courage.

"What is the matter, Qasim?" the Imam leaned over and inquired.

"I want to ask you something, but my courage fails me."

"Why do you hesitate?" The Imam loved his nephew. He was his nephew as well as his son-in-law. Honouring his brother's last wish, he had arranged the nikah between Qasim and his daughter, Fatima Kubra. He was like a father to the young man, and never before had Qasim exhibited such reserve. The Imam signalled to him to come closer.

"Do you want to ask me something? You look like the very image of a question, but you do not speak. Does this deference mean that you are angry with your uncle?"

"For many days now I have been trying to ask you something but ..." Qasim fell silent again.

"Then why do you not ask?"

"I am afraid of the answer."

"If you are afraid, then there is no need to ask the question."

Qasim looked perplexed. When the Imam discerned faint smiles hovering on the faces of Abbas and Ali Akbar, he realised that the older men were teasing young Qasim.

He smiled and said, "Do not pay any attention to what these two are saying. Ask me what you want to, without hesitation. You may not be able to ask again."

"Is my name among the warriors? Chacha Abbas said I'm not an adult, I cannot take part in jihad."

"Abbas is right in saying you are not of age. But whether or not you have the right to jihad is something that has not been decided yet. This is a matter that needs some thought."

"So when will the decision be made?" Qasim asked impatiently.

"First tell me, what are your thoughts on death."

"Death is more satisfying than the slumber of a tired, weary traveller, it is sweeter than honey. Provided it come after a jihad carried out on the path of truth."

"Well, then it is decided. You are mature, you have the right to jihad."

The bloom of spring spread across the boyish face of young Qasim, who had not drunk a drop of water since the seventh of Muharram. He looked at Abbas and Ali Akbar proudly, and then broke into a laugh.

"But remember, this is no ordinary jihad," said Husain. "This is not a battle between two armies. A powerful and cruel force has surrounded a handful of peace-loving people and has made preparations to kill them. For this reason, the terms of jihad do not apply here. Today, every child of this defenceless army is a soldier. Every restriction has been lifted in your case, and also for Aun and Muhammad, and yes, even the six-month-old Asghar."

Qasim was elated, as if he had not just been given the order to prepare for his death, but had been handed the sovereignty of the seven kingdoms.

A Drop

*The night's melancholic vestment was ripped—
And the morning appeared weary with sorrow and
despondency—
The golden face of the moon turned pale—
The bowl of the sun filled, drop by drop, with the rays of
light—
The tired and fatigued battalion of stars departed from
the skies—
And flecks of sand were rising in the air like golden rain—*

As soon as the sun lit up the world, the silvery glow of the stars melted into the expanse of the sky like dew, the sobbing candle cast a longing gaze upon the moths as it took its last breath.

There was silence in the tents of the Imam.

The notes of the flute were drowning in anguish and the drums were in shock. The universe was trembling fearfully at the thought of the murder of the Prophet of God's defenseless grandson. The hoary sky's back was bent with grief, the earth was in mourning, sadness shattered the heart of the waves of the River Furat.*

Husain Ibn Ali gathered his companions around him and said, "Friends, the day has dawned, it is the time to praise and glorify God. Get up so that we can say our morning prayers."

* The Euphrates

Hearing this, all the men, young and old, rose from their bed, donned splendid garments, combed their hair, put on their turbans, draped their beautiful colourful cloaks over their shoulders, tied silk belts around their waists, and applied attar and musk on their bodies. Their faces shone with the glow of purity and Allah's name was on their parched lips. It seemed that instead of getting ready for battle they were preparing to attend a grand celebration. Looking joyful and jubilant, they emerged from their tents. There was no sign of the distress and anxiety that had beset them the night before. Everyone immediately became alert when they heard the Imam's voice.

The clouds of despair dissipated, the air was fragrant with the scent of flowers, the gentle and moist morning breeze quenched the thirst in the camp. Birds began to chirp, everyone looked longingly at the river, but their hearts were not heavy. The waves of the River Furat were cresting restlessly, the first rays of the sun shone hesitantly, coyly, the pearls of morning dew glistened on the bosom of the desert. The breeze blew softly so that dust would not cover the faces of the flowers. Yearnings arose in hearts, a strange kind of beauty permeated the atmosphere, hearts bloomed, dewdrops quivered like gems on the leaves.

But Husain and his companions were thirsting for a drop of water. Ignoring everything, they lowered their heads in the presence of God. Husain Ibn Ali gave in his sermon:

Yes, my dear ones, my brave and devoted companions, the day of our trial has arrived. Today is the day of confrontation and battle, it is the day we meet our Maker. Blessed is this morning on which we are getting ready to do jihad for the truth. Thank the Lord that we did not surrender to evil and deceit. This status is awarded to

only a fortunate few. We are God's chosen ones; He has selected us for a special purpose. We are the protectors of righteousness. Come, together let us thank our Creator and pray that He accepts this small, insignificant sacrifice we are about to make. All we now hope is that our steps do not falter and we arrive victorious at our destination. Death will come either today or tomorrow, so friends, why not welcome it with honour. We know that the enemy's forces are substantial, they are equipped with the most effective weaponry, their horses are watered and fed. In the face of this sea of oppression and violence, we are only an inconsequential droplet. But by God's grace, this droplet has decided at this moment to turn into a storm.

A wave of joy rippled through the crowd. People felt their courage growing. They embraced each other as they engaged in spirited banter. Then the Imam asked Ali Akbar to call out the *azaan*. When the desolate desert rang with the call for prayer, every single sprig and spray was enthralled. Hearing her son's voice, Bano came and stood at the entrance of her tent. Zainab wished good fortune upon her nephew from afar. The enemy broke out in a sweat, their hearts were filled with an unknown dread.

The armies were making arrangements for Husain's murder. Ibn Ziyad and Shimr were organising the forces, their lances shone, the spears were hoisted. There was a carnival-like atmosphere on the banks of the river—the soldiers were still engaged in merry-making, splashing water at each other; the water-carriers were filling up water-skins and liberally soaking the ground. In a short while the sun would be out and fire would rain down on earth. Even the animals were not ready to come out of the water. But the

guards had been doubled on the banks and, like a steel wall, they stood between Imam Husain's family and the river. Like a helpless prisoner, the river hurled its head against its banks. It was the third day without water for Husain, his family and his companions. Everyone's throat was dry. While green foliage flourished everywhere, Fatima Zahra's garden withered away. The silvery waters of the River Al-Qama* were surging behind the fortified walls, while the family of the Prophet was thirsting for a single drop of water.

Despite this not a single brow was furrowed in anxiety among Husain's companions, there was no fear in their hearts. Suddenly, the enemy army started beating the war drums. The Imam's camp shook and vibrated with the boom and echo of the beats. Frightened, the children started crying. After issuing orders to prepare for battle, the Imam walked over to the tents.

The women were overcome with anxiety, the children were sobbing. Zainab Bint Ali sat on the prayer rug, pleading and praying to God for her brother's safety.

"Allah, I pray for my brother's safety, I entrust him to your care. I pray that my Bano be spared from widowhood, may her children be safe, bless these innocent souls with your mercy, they are your Prophet's family. They are weak and sick from starvation and thirst. O Protector of the world, what have we done to deserve the onslaught of such calamity from every direction. After you snatched Naana Jaan and Amma and Baba away from us, you also took away Hasan. Now we, helpless and defenseless, are only left with Husain as our support, and today he too is in danger."

* A creek, a tributary of the Euphrates.

Imam Husain stepped inside and sat next to his sister on the prayer rug.

"Instead of offering thanks to God you are complaining, Zainab Bint Ali? What has happened to you today? Allah has blessed us with this vast universe filled with unlimited bounties. It is human beings who have set up road blocks, guards, placed padlocks everywhere and poisoned life."

"But why all this, Bhai? Is there no way out? Look at the faces of the children, I feel as if knives are plunging through my heart when I see them. I cannot bear to see this any longer. In God's name, please do something."

"I will go and teach these sinners a lesson."

"No, no, in God's name, do not go! They will not let you live, they are blinded by the arrogance of power," said Zainab, agitated.

"It is my duty to do the best I can. All right, get up and bring Bano here. Where are my daughters? Will you all not ready me for battle? Go, Zainab, get my Naana Jaan's cloak, that is what I will wear it to the place where I will meet death. And bring me Baba's sword as well. Today, I miss them both very much. Their garment and weapon will make me feel they are near me. My courage will be fortified. Fetch our flags as well. We will select our standard bearer today."

Everyone helped Imam Husain don the armour. He kissed Ali Ibn Abi Talib's Zulfiqar* and secured it to his belt. The women of the Prophet's family stood around him, their hair undone, sobbing inconsolably. Holding the standard firmly, Zainab wept silently. Aun and Muhammad came to her and asked, "Ammi, who will have the good fortune of being the army's standard bearer? We are ready to lay

* Imam Ali's sword that was passed down to Imam Husain.

down our lives for Mamu Jaan, but we are afraid of saying anything to him. Please put in a word for us."

"Be quiet, the Imam is our leader. Whoever he bestows this honour on is his choice. I will not say a word."

"We are the grandsons of the Lion of God, we have the right to be the standard bearers." The boys were persistent.

"I'm warning you, do not talk like this. You are not the only grandsons of the Lion of God. Wherever I turn my gaze I see Ali's cherished ones. And do you know that the honour of carrying the standard that Baba received was only a small acknowledgment of his bravery and courage? What a difficult time it was. The Muslim armies were suffering defeat at the hands of the powerful Roman and Syrian forces. That was when my Baba exhibited such valiant feats with his sword, which will be remembered till the end of time. Naana Jaan entrusted him with the standard and he enhanced its glory. He routed the enemy, his opponents retreated hastily. What great feats have you accomplished, how many entrenchments have you seized that you should be dreaming of becoming the standard bearers? Do not be foolish!"

"Our Dada Jaan was also a standard bearer."

"Jafar-e-Tayyar received this honour on the basis of his swordsmanship. Don't depend on the accomplishments of your forefathers. You have an opportunity today to show your mettle so that people themselves acknowledge that, yes, you are indeed the maternal grandsons of Ali Ibn Abi Talib and the paternal grandsons of Jafar-e-Tayyar. Do not indulge in self-praise."

The children's faces fell and they lowered their eyes in shame.

"Do you know what I'm going through at this moment? My Husain, deprived of water since three days, is going

to confront these tyrants. His life is in danger, my heart is pounding with fear, what answer will I have for Amma on the Day of Resurrection? But why would you be worried about me, you are only worried about your prestige."

Tears began to flow from the children's eyes. Imam Husain came in just then. He lovingly placed his hands on the shoulders of the two boys and said, "Zainab you break the hearts of my warriors. They are the greatest of lions, you will see what feats of courage they will perform on the battlefield. Those watching them will be struck with amazement. After all, whose sons are these courageous children? If the majority opinion is in favour of giving them the standard, I will have no objection."

Zainab said, "These small children will not be able to carry it. The grandeur of the standard, in my opinion, can only be upheld by Abbas Ibn Ali, he is the one who is truly worthy of it."

"We are of the same opinion," said everyone in unison.

"Abbas Ibn Ali, come forward," the Imam said with a smile.

Abbas wiped the sweat from his forehead with his sleeve and kneeled before him.

Zainab kissed her brother's forehead and handed the standard to him.

"Bhai, always uphold the magnificence of this standard."

Everyone congratulated Abbas. His wife, standing in a corner with her baby in her arms, watched her good-looking and dignified husband. She held her head high with pride. Tears flowed from her eyes. She bowed before Zainab and said, "How can I thank you for this honour?"

Zainab embraced her sister-in-law.

“May God protect your husband and your children.”

“I am your humble servant, may God protect our Imam, may He protect Bano’s husband, may her children live long, may they grow and mature under the protection of their mother and father.”

Suddenly, Sakina tore through the crowd and came in. Someone had told her that Chacha Abbas had been appointed the standard bearer. “Why are people gathered here? Where is my uncle, let me embrace him.”

Everyone was happy with this decision. Aun and Muhammad stood quietly in a corner. Zainab’s eyes welled with tears when she saw them. She knew they were disappointed because they had not been given the standard. She felt a wave of affection for her sons. She gestured them to come forward.

“Why do you look so forlorn?”

The boys stood still, their gaze pinned to the floor.

“Do you know how much your behaviour saddens me? Do you have no regard for me? You are the fruit of my ten-year-long efforts as a mother. You are my reason for living. If you behave in this petty manner, my heart will break. I’m telling you as the mother who nursed you, that if you act foolishly at this moment, I will consider my ten years of hard work have been for nothing. What will people say if they notice you, I will not be able to face anyone.”

The boys broke down, ran to their mother and fell at her feet.

“We won’t make this mistake again. Please forgive us. We are the humble servants of Abbas Mamu, we will go and kiss his feet right now. No, Ammi Jaan, we’re not sad because we didn’t get the standard, we are ashamed

of our stupidity. We kept saying such childish things. Everyone must be secretly ridiculing us. That is why we are so downcast."

"May you live long, may all the good fortunes that life can offer be yours. Go and congratulate him—in earnest, not just as a formality."

When Aun and Muhammad went to offer their felicitations to Abbas, he said to them, "Will you hold my standard for a minute while I tie my shoe laces properly?"

Aun's face became ashen.

"No, this will bring bad luck and..."

"Both of you hold it together ... there will not be any bad luck." Abbas handed them the standard to them.

Their hearts pounded, their faces changed colour. Abbas was calmly tying his shoe laces. Ali Akbar and Qasim moved closer, perhaps because they thought that if the pole of the standard became unstable they would support it, but Abbas gestured them to stop.

"The standard falls when the standard bearer falls. It has nothing to do with age, it depends on the intensity of emotion. Aun, Muhammad, don't you remember the words of the Imam? Everyone in this battle, whether young or old, is a warrior and has to guard his trench. I am certain that if the need arises, you will, perhaps not individually, but together, manage to carry the weight of this standard."

The children in the camp surrounded the standard. Some kissed the banner, others pressed it to their eyes. The green banner fluttered in the breeze. It was a strangely soothing sight.

"My thirst diminishes when I see this standard," Sakina said, running her dry tongue over her parched lips.

Imam Husain's small army was also waiting anxiously to see the standard and the standard bearer. Everyone knew that Husain Ibn Ali was extremely fond of his sister. She is the exact image of Fatima, and he always seeks her blessings whenever he embarks on something new. She was the one who had suggested Abbas Ibn Ali's name.

Balancing the standard in his hand, Abbas slowly emerged from the tent. People were stunned to see him. It was as if the Lion of God, Ali Ibn Abi Talib was himself walking towards them with the standard. There was dignity etched on his face, fine lines of red lined the white of his eyes like bloodied swords. He was known as the Moon of Banu Hashim. He was so good-looking that when he walked the streets people would be in awe. He was so tall that when he was astride an Arabian steed he could easily take his foot off the stirrup and touch the ground. Seeing his face in the morning was considered a good omen. People referred to him as the messenger of Divine Mercy.

A wave of jubilation spread through the group. First, the standard bearer appeared with the standard, then the curtain of the tent lifted once again and Imam Husain stepped out.

A hush descended upon the small crowd. It was after a long time that anyone had seen the Imam in the garb of a soldier. No Arab is considered to be old at the age of fifty-seven and the Imam had lived a principled and disciplined life which made him appear much younger than his years. His body was agile and well-built, his step was sure and confident.

When everyone stoodup respectfully, Habib Ibn Mazahir said, "Praise God, the day of our trial has arrived. Yes, my friends, our desire to sacrifice our lives should not suffocate

and die. Today is the happy day of battle, we will fulfill our destinies. Let us see who takes the lead in sacrificing his life, who all will gain the honour of giving up their lives under the shelter of this standard." He held a corner of the banner, touched it to his eyes, then kissed it.

Everyone offered heartfelt felicitations to Abbas on receiving the honour of becoming the standard bearer. Everyone present said in unison: "Who can be more deserving of this honour than a fine young man like Abbas? Devoted son of Ali, Husain's right-hand man, one who reveres his elders, a confidante and companion of the young, who has great love for all the children—is there any quality this beloved man of God does not possess? Dignified, loyal, compassionate, and generous, one who has received the gift of courage as a legacy and who embodies the qualities of truth and integrity. It is difficult to find a man more generous and a warrior more formidable than Abul Fazl Abbas. His friendship is a blessing, his anger, God help us!"

The standard with the green banner swayed like a tall, strong tree. Under its shelter, Ali's son stood gracefully, his head held high with pride. The panja* atop the standard dazzled in the sun, every fold of the banner reminded one of the undulating waves of the Heavenly spring of Kausar. Little Sakina said something that was very true: "My thirst is diminished when I look at the standard."

Praise God, what a strange army it was. Just a few men, but each one of them was unique in his own way, capable

* The panja, the image of the hand, which is placed on a standard represents the 'five' infallibles—Prophet Muhammad; his daughter, Fatima Zehra; his son-in-law and cousin, Ali Ibn Abi Talib; and his grandsons, Hasan and Husain.

of outshining the thousands in the enemy forces. Each Hashmi youth was matchless. There was Ali Akbar, whom everyone referred to as the the Prophet's look-alike. Despite his youthfulness his expression was one of maturity and he inspired awe. As for Qasim, the onset of manhood and the somewhat uncomfortable weight of the armour made him look magnificent in a special way. It was heartbreaking to see the Lion of God's young grandsons, Aun and Muhammad dressed in suits of armour; was this the time for them to play games or engage in combat? But circumstances had placed swords in hands that should be playing with toys. Each one of them was the epitome of courage. Balancing small daggers on their shoulders they stood in such a state of readiness that if the famous general, Rustam-e-Zaman had appeared before them he would have been startled for a minute. With their sleeves rolled up, they waited eagerly, as if it wasn't a battle but child's play. Their lips were parched but they would not even permit themselves to run their tongue over their lips for relief.

The beating of the war drums sounded once again and the desert shook, the forest trembled, the shields were lined upfront and the blades of the swords shimmered. Everyone was ready to lay down their lives and greet death joyfully. A cry rose from Husain's army: Ya Hyder!

A commotion brokeout among the enemy's troops. This was a battle cry that had caused many an army to retreat. Spears were raised and arrows were strung on the bowstrings.

Imam Husain said, "No one from our side will initiate the attack. I am the son of the believer in the Qur'an, I will never attack the enemy first. Killing and plundering is not my calling. I am being forced to undertake jihad in order

to protect the life and honour of my family."

Then he addressed the enemy in a loud voice, "If you consider it appropriate, please put down your trumpets for some time. I would like to say something to you, listen carefully."

The moment he spoke, a sudden hush descended on the roaring army. The beating of war drums ceased, the bugle was silenced, the cymbals were stilled. How could the soldiers continue playing their instruments? They were in a daze. They had advanced with great pomp and show, but the awe and dignity of the Prophet's grandson created a feeling of dread in their hearts.

When the noise died down, Imam Husain's voice resounded across in the plain and in the desert: "Do you know against whom you have come to wage a war? I am Husain, the grandson of the Prophet of God who showed you the path of righteousness, transformed you into real human beings and gave you Islam, a guardian of peace and amity. I am the son of the Lion of God whose courage and bravery elevated Islam to great heights. Is my only crime that I am the grandson of Islam's founder and the son of the Arab nation's greatest conqueror? I ask you, have I harmed any one of you, or seized your property or killed anyone?"

"No," the voices of the soldiers rose spontaneously.

"Then, for what crime are you here to attack me? Will slaying the Prophet's family bring you rewards in the afterlife?"

"No," another loud cry emerged from the crowd of soldiers.

"Will the death of the Prophet's last descendant extinguish your fire of hatred?"

"No!"

“Why then are you here to attack a small army of oppressed people with such a massive force? Is this what the courage and daring of the Arab nation demands?”

A wave of distress ran through Shimr’s forces. Ibn Ziyad was flustered.

“Husain Ibn Ali is misleading our men, he wants to confuse them by invoking their faith. Tell these soldiers to stop barking ‘no, no’ like dogs, without any thought or understanding.”

The commanders immediately silenced the most voluble soldiers among the troops. There was a special force of select fighters whose build was like wrestlers, and these men used the whip to keep the others in check. What the Imam was saying was not quite clear to most of the soldiers anyway.

In any case, a soldier lacks real intelligence. Also, none of them were prepared for this battle even after they had been given an explanation of some grand purpose behind it. Most of them did not even know whom they were fighting against, while many didn’t know much about Imam Husain. When Amir Mu’awiya was alive, he had decreed that the mention of the Prophet’s family was imprudent and a crime. Everyone had regarded Mu’awiya as the lawful heir of the Prophet of God and the rightful Caliph of the Muslims. There were some who knew that the Prophet’s relatives were alive, but they too had no idea who they were and where they lived.

A few were aware that the Prophet’s daughter’s son, Imam Husain Ibn Ali was in Medina. They held him in great esteem even though they didn’t know him personally, had never seen him, and could not imagine that their reigning Caliph, who was supposed to be God’s blessing, would bear any malice toward the Prophet of God.

Only a handful of people had knowledge of what was actually going on, but they, like Hurr, had misjudged Husain and were merely following the governor's orders, although they were certain that the situation would not reach the point of bloodshed. Some way would be found for a reconciliation, they thought. Husain would be convinced, some concessions and considerations would come from Yazid. These were the men who had been crying out "no, no" during the Imam's speech. But it was necessary to stop this from going on any further, so Ibn Sa'ad interrupted the Imam and said, "Ya Husain, Ya Ibn Ali, don't think that we are fools. We are not about to be taken in by your words. You're rebelling against the reigning Caliph. If you pledge allegiance to him the matter will be resolved."

"If you are not as foolish as you claim then show some wisdom and openly admit that the matter will not be resolved, that as long as I am alive this will continue."

"We swear that if you take the oath of allegiance we will escort you courteously to the governor of Kufa. This is the order we have received. We have not been given any orders to kill you."

"Either you are liars or you are betraying your master. If you do not have orders to kill us then why are we being deprived of drinking water? As for escorting us 'courteously' to Kufa, you must also know that from there we will be 'courteously' sent to Yazid's court."

"Yes, and not a hair on your body will be harmed. If you surrender peacefully and without a struggle, there is no threat to your life."

"I will not surrender before anyone except God. I prefer the truth to lies and consider death better than selling

my conscience. I do not regard your king worthy of my allegiance. I cannot entrust the well-being of Rasulullah's followers to such a man. I cannot strangle my faith and my beliefs by pledging allegiance to a man whose hands are tainted with the blood of innocent people."

"You are being shortsighted, Husain! If you take the vow of allegiance you can save the lives of your family and friends."

"And your emperor will reward me with riches, he will give me gold and estates, and instead of dying from thirst my family and my children will live a life of prosperity and wealth."

"Why not? Our master is generous and large-hearted."

"If he promises to give me so many gifts, what will he demand from me in return?"

"Nothing except your friendship and your favour."

"After this answer, would you still insist that you are not a fool? He is making plans to kill me in order to secure my friendship and my favour? How absurd! Why don't you say that he needs me to pledge my allegiance because he is a usurper and a charlatan, he's deceitful and a liar. He has made life impossible for thousands by indiscriminately flouting every principle of Islam in order to live a life of luxury. He also knows that he has silenced people using the sword and his armies, he has forced them to fall at his feet in obeisance. But if the self-confidence of the Arab nation is roused and people realise that their rights have been snatched away from them, they will overthrow him. He fears that this sentiment will be aroused in them when they see me, because I am the Prophet's grandson and I regard Yazid's rule as an insult to Islam. Those who share my views and value my principles

have been crushed, reduced to dust. If tomorrow this handful of dust turns into a storm, your master's throne will be in danger. This tiny drop can become a raging tempest that will sweep away this well-established system that thrives on the selfishness of a few powerful men. Your emperor is terrified of the Arab nation and Muslims. My oath of allegiance will prove to everyone that his actions are in accordance with the Prophet Muhammad's beliefs. He needs me to validate his actions. That is why he wishes to secure my friendship and favour. This will remove even the slightest doubt there is in people's minds, they will acknowledge him as their rightful Caliph, follow him without question, and I will be held responsible for their mistake. People will regard me as his partner. I have withdrawn from this world, have kept myself away from everything, I am a stranger in my own land. Examine your own behaviour for a moment. You are loyal to your master, you have faith and conviction in his command, you are ready to obey his any order, whether it is justified or not, so much so that you will not refrain from killing me and my children. If you have the right to do as you please, then permit me also to appear before my Master on the Day of Resurrection with my honour intact. I am the grandson of your Prophet and I am a Muslim. Do not commit the sin of forcing me to sell my faith."

When the commanders and military officers saw that their men were softening, they became apprehensive. They proclaimed loudly: "O brave men of Arabia, Husain is a sorcerer, he is trying to trap you in his web of words. Do not listen to him, he's leading you astray. The reigning Caliph, protected by the blessings of God, is your well-wisher and leader. Husain is inciting you against him. If you listen to him you will lose both in this world and the next. Our

Caliph is compassionate and generous, but if you disobey him then there is no one more wrathful and tyrannical in this world. What will happen if you defy his orders? Your home, your family, your children, everything will be destroyed. Your house will be set on fire, your children will be sold as slaves, your young, virgin daughters will be married off to lepers."

Imam Husain said, "These are all lies and fabrications. I have no desire to seize land. I spurn your king's throne and his power. If I want, thousands will rise to my call today; if I want to become a conqueror, a magnificent army can gather under my leadership, a million swords will be drawn from their sheaths in response to my call. I will get unconditional support not just from the Arab nation but from foreign nations as well. And I can carry on this battle for years. But I do not wish to do so. My prudence will probably seem ridiculous to you. But I have been raised by the Prophet of God, I have received the lesson of truth from my mother, and I have sat on the knee of a courageous father and learned the principles of life from him. Look closely, can you see whose cloak I am wearing? Do you recognise this turban? Whose coat of mail and mirrored armour covers this ill-fated body? This horse, the shield and this Zulfiqar—these are the legacies that God has blessed me with. How can I put up with the bloodshed of my grandfather's followers? I have rejected all such suggestions that were presented to me. I do not want to create discord among Muslims so that a brother is compelled to spill the blood of his own. I bade farewell to my home and left with my friends and family in search of peace and quiet so that I could spend my life in prayer in some unknown part of the world. I do not boast about the favours I have granted, but you can ask Hurr. If I

wanted to I could have destroyed his thirsting army in no time. But when I saw the men and animals dying of thirst, I couldn't bear it. I honoured the legacy of compassion and courage I have inherited. But that was that day and this is today. Those who quenched the thirst of others have been denied water since three days. If we had not given Hurr and his men our water that day, despite your barriers we would have had enough left at least for the children and our throats wouldn't be hoarse from thirst."

The Imam's voice cracked. He said softly, "What can I expect from anyone? Everyone has turned away from me. No one is willing to give us even a drop of water. Every descendent of the Prophet has a claim over his followers, but I do not wish to lay claim to this right. Instead, I ask you to show us compassion in the name of humanity. I cannot bear to see the children thirsty. They are young and innocent, they are near death. The river is surging in front of us while my children are desperate for a drop of water. Your animals are polluting the water, the slaves are constantly sprinkling water on the ground around us and my dear ones' throats are dry and prickly. Sajjad is ill and there is no medicine for him nor a drop to moisten his throat. When I see the sickly faces of the little ones, I feel as if I am dying. O Muslims! In God's name, please put an end to this cruelty and oppression, do not taint your hands with the blood of the Prophet's family."

When Imam Husain finished his speech the entire army went into a state of shock, then everyone started sobbing loudly, and agitated, the lines moved forward. In the next instant, the defence guards advanced quickly and positioned themselves firmly between the soldiers and the Imam like a wall of steel.

"Ya Husain!" the men began chanting, and Omar Sa'ad issued the order that his own army be cut up like carrots and radishes.

The Imam turned his horse around and rode back to his camp. The killing and bloodshed halted after a long time and the ranks were re-grouped. No one knew the number of dead bodies piled up behind the rocks.

Omar Sa'ad's gaze turned repeatedly towards Hurr. During this entire drama, Hurr sat unmoving like a statue on his horse, his back straight, his eyes fixed on some unknown pivot. Tears streamed involuntarily from his eyes, his lips were moving.

"Oh God, Oh God," Hurr was muttering repeatedly under his breath. "Every word that Husain Ibn Ali has uttered is true. Anyone who doubts him is a kafir, a wretch. Husain is God's blessing, he is righteous, his friends and companions will go to Heaven, the wealth of faith and of this world is at his feet. Generosity and open-heartedness are his legacy. Alas! he from whose door no one has ever returned empty-handed has to spread his hands before us sinners. O Muslim nation, what is to become of you?"

Omar Sa'ad became flustered when he heard this.

"You are defending the Imam? This is blatant treachery. Instead of praising your master you are glorifying Husain? My spies have been informing me of your altered attitude. Your words ring of treason. Muhammad's grandson is helpless and impoverished, what riches and rewards can he bestow on you? What special inducements has he offered you? Hunh! What generosity can these beggars hand out? Perhaps your resolve is weakening because of your greed for Paradise. Such regard for Husain Ibn Ali is not good, you will regret it."

"How much greater can my regret be? I'm the one who lured him to this place," said Hurr dejectedly.

"Hurr, I sympathise with you. You are a brave soldier and a first-class commander. You have a family, your future is bright, your clever move of bringing Husain here is being praised at court. You showed great foresight when you barred Husain's access to water, or else we would have had to drag the fight on for much longer. Owing to your astuteness and cunning, today Husain is a broken man. It won't be long now before he is forced to surrender and take the oath of allegiance. Just think how we will be commended and lauded for our victory. We would have defeated the lion that terrified our master, our name will shine like the sun among the Arabs. We will receive countless rewards and honours. Husain is about to break now. Just one more blow and there will be gold and more gold for us!"

"Husain will not break until the Day of Judgment, he will never take the vow of allegiance," Hurr said sharply.

"Well, then he will lose his life. Perhaps it will be for the best because that will solve this problem once and for all. Anyway, I think even if Husain takes the vow of allegiance he will still have to present himself at Yazid's court. That will take a long time, and what if there is resistance along the way? The problem is that even if he does come around there can be complications. His supporters and opposition groups will create disturbances."

"The Imam will not take the vow of allegiance, you may be certain of that," Hurr said with confidence.

"Husain has bought your devotion by giving you water. You are constantly finishing your sentences by praising him. How shameful! You are openly supporting the enemy. In battle, one doesn't care if it's the Prophet or the Rasul on

the other side, there are no concessions. The only thing that matters is the order given by the ruler."

"A curse be upon you, by God, you are a murderer! Do you not stop to think for a moment who Husain is? He is the grandson of the Prophet to whom we send blessings, whose name we invoke with God's name. Today, he is facing such an ordeal. After hearing his speech filled with so much despair I have been shaken to the core of my being."

Omar Sa'ad turned pale. He said irately, "What kind of cowardly talk is this? You have gone mad. Hurr, why are you inviting trouble? Do you really want to destroy yourself?"

Hurr said angrily, "If a man of God like Husain can be ruined, what chance do I have? Omar Sa'ad you are indeed very greedy and avaricious. Here people are facing death and all you can think of are favours and honours."

"Hurr, why are you intent on putting your life in danger? You know that there are spies everywhere. If I have been informed of your change of heart then the news will reach the court as well. Think of what will happen to you then."

"Why are you so worried about me? I am neither your brother-in-law nor your son-in-law. Why do you care?"

"You are getting out of hand, you miserable wretch! My operatives have made a note of every word that comes out of your mouth. Once this mission is complete, you will be tried in court. So far, you have only enjoyed the Caliph's favours, then you will also get a taste of his wrath."

"Save these threats for someone who is afraid of the torments of this world. Tell your operatives to write whatever they want to discredit me." Saying this, Hurr turned his horse around and rode off.

Omar Sa'ad ordered some soldiers to follow him. "I'm warning you, don't lose sight of him, his objectives are

dubious, his intentions are untrustworthy, keep a close watch on him."

Imam Husain returned to his tent.

"I have done my duty," he said to his companions.

"My heart tells me that I, too, should address these fools once," said Zuhair Ibn Al Qain.

"Certainly," said the Imam with a smile. "This is also a strategy in combat. The only difference is that in this instance the attack is being carried out with words instead of swords."

Zuhair Ibn Al Qain, covered from head to toe in armour, came forward from his ranks and called out, "O people of Kufa! Fear the wrath of the Almighty. We are all Muslims, the followers of the same Prophet. As long as we don't draw our swords against each other, we continue to share a bond, and that gives me the right to advice you. The day we pick up the sword against each other and shed the blood of our own people, from thereon our Islamic brotherhood will cease to exist. Today, God has put us all to the test; he has thrust great difficulty upon Husain Ibn Ali and He wants to see how we treat the grandson of the Prophet. You also know Yazid and Obaidullah Ibn Ziyad well. We have seen how mercilessly their men have killed our scholars and those who have studied the Qur'an, and yet we have tolerated their acts. O Muslims, how long will you continue to remain silent spectators? The tyranny that Imam Husain is being subjected to right now, will you stand by and watch it silently, too? No, great warriors of Arabia, you are not insensitive or shameless. I know your blood must be boiling. Leave Omar Ibn Sa'ad's side, desist from committing murder and return to your homes."

The government's supporters started belittling Zuhair Ibn Al Qain and shouted slogans praising Ibn Sa'ad. Many,

however, remained silent. Those "instigated" by Husain had been won over and now Zuhair Ibn Al Qain had roused their loyalty.

"May God silence your tongue," said Shimr irritably, fixing an arrow on his bowstring.

Zuhair Ibn Al Qain ignored his action and said, "O Shimr, why do you wish to become a sinner? There is still time, give up on your unholy mission and atone for your sins."

"In a short while you will be silenced forever," said Shimr.

"If you are trying to frighten me with death, then I swear to God, dying with Husain will be more pleasant than staying alive with you. O worshipper of material wealth, if you shed the blood of the Prophet's family and slay his relatives and friends, you'll never be forgiven."

Imam Husain saw that Zuhair Ibn Al Qain's words were not having any effect. Every soldier in the enemy's army was alone, fearful. He didn't have the courage to resist. Husain said to one of his men, "Tell Zuhair Ibn Al Qain to come back. He has done his duty. Our enemy is deaf and mute. No amount of reasoning will have any effect on them."

Zuhair Ibn Al Qain lowered his head in regret and came back.

"O, Husain, are these soldiers really Muslim? If so, then what has happened to their eyes?"

"The dust of ignorance and apathy has clouded their judgement. One lamp will not remove the darkness that has been nurtured in so many hearts since so many years."

Hurr said to Omar Ibn Sa'ad again, "So, the battle will really take place?"

"The battle will surely happen and the world will remember it forever."

“Is there not one condition that Husain Ibn Ali has put forth that is worth accepting?”

“I swear to God, if things were in my control, I would have accepted them without hesitation. But our Caliph has become superstitious. What harm can the Imam cause him? You tell me, what should I do? Your governor, Ibn Ziyad is not ready to change his mind.”

After this Hurr realised there was no point in saying anything further. So, he moved away. Qurra Ibn Qais, who belonged to Hurr’s tribe and had been assigned to spy on him, followed him so that he could keep an eye.

“Have you taken your horse to the water yet?”

“No.”

“Are you not going to take him?”

Ibn Qais realised that Hurr wanted to distract him. Perhaps he doesn’t want to fight, he thought, and is afraid I will report him. But what difference does it make if Hurr doesn’t want to fight? He said, “Yes, I’ll take my horse to the water now.”

After he got rid of Ibn Qais, Hurr began making his way towards the Imam’s camp. At this time, Mahajir Ibn Aus, who was also from Hurr’s tribe, arrived on the scene and asked, “Are you preparing to attack?”

Hurr did not reply, but suddenly his whole body was trembling.

“Hurr, are you all right? You are Kufa’s bravest warrior, but right now your face is ashen and you are sweating profusely. What is the matter?”

“Before me, on one side is paradise, on the other hell,” said Hurr, his voice choking.

“Are you finding it difficult to come to a decision? That is surprising. You are also a Muslim.”

"You are right. I have been indecisive, I have been wavering for too long, may God forgive me." Saying this, he kicked his horse and shot away like an arrow. Before people could realise what was happening, Hurr had escaped.

A commotion arose in the enemy's ranks.

"Look, Imam Husain's supporter is riding off to serve him."

Omar Sa'ad's face blanched, he looked dazed.

A faithful soldier like Hurr had betrayed them. He gave orders to a few soldiers: "Pursue this traitor immediately and bring him back to me, dead or alive."

But Hurr's horse had disappeared in the blink of an eye, like lightning or a will 'o wisp.

Everyone in Husain's camp became alert when they saw Hurr riding towards them. Their lances were held up high, bowstrings were drawn and swords were unsheathed. But as Hurr came closer, the Imam's face, withered with thirst, suddenly shone. He smiled and said to Abbas, "Look, Husain's friend is coming. Tell everyone no one should stop him. Go and welcome him, my dear brother, my beloved friend is coming to us."

Hurr shouted from a distance, "O, beloved of the Prophet, may you live long! I am not worthy of your forgiveness, but I have come as I have faith in your generosity and benevolence. Please forgive me so that my faith and my life may be enriched again. My Master, I had wavered and was unsure, my heart and mind were not in my control, I was unable to see a way out, and I couldn't find another door, except for the one at your feet where I now seek refuge. This sinful man is ashamed of his existence. O, Master of both worlds, take pity on me. Save me from this struggle. My conscience has been rebuking me for days, I am repelled by my own self. You are the only one who can rescue me from

this spiritual anguish. In the name of the Lion of God, show this lost, adrift man the way."

Tears streamed from the Imam's eyes. He laughed joyfully, extended both his arms and moved quickly towards Hurr, who ran forward to kiss his feet. The Imam lifted him up and embraced him.

"I have forgiven you, my God has forgiven you. I am proud of your friendship, my dear one. You are a man of conscience, you are just and wise. You listened to the voice of truth and recognised it. Your presence alone is stronger than a thousand enemies. This is not my victory, it is the victory of truth, my faith and my belief, and you are my partner."

With great pomp and show the Imam brought Hurr to his tent. On his left and right were Qasim Ibn Hasan and Ali Akbar, respectively, Abbas stood in front of them with the standard in his hand. Blessed by God, Hurr felt honoured by his good fortune as he walked in the radiant company of the Imam, every sin, every wrong-doing forgiven, as if he had just been reborn from his mother's womb.

"Loosen your belt and take it off," Abbas said respectfully.

"And rest for a while," the Imam added affectionately, placing a hand on his shoulder.

"Master, I took God's name as I tied this belt and it will come off only when I have fulfilled my promise. I have to confront Shimr and Omar Ibn Sa'ad. I have come here with the desire to send them both to hell. They are furious with me. My dissent has shaken the very foundation of their beliefs. Look, those wretches have already begun shooting arrows. Before any child loses his life, give me the opportunity to pay homage to you and then I will go out into the battlefield and sacrifice my life."

The Imam was overcome with sorrow. He said emotionally, "My friend, I will remember your love till my dying day. Everyone respects those in power, but you decided to hold my hand at a time when I am helpless and despairing. How can I ever repay you for this great sacrifice? I regret that you did not give me the chance to extend any hospitality, although we have no provisions except for love. We have not eaten in three days. In this state of exile, what kind of welcome can I offer?"

Hurr lowered his gaze respectfully and said, "One affectionate glance from you is reward enough for me. The honour you have bestowed upon me is the greatest wealth I have accumulated. Whatever I earned before this moment is worthless."

Hurr's arrival breathed new life in the crestfallen spirits of the women and children in the camp. It seemed as though a huge wave from the River Al Qama had swept away all their thirst.

One by one, everyone embraced Hurr. He wept with joy. His wife was in the enemy camp. God alone knows how she would be punished. But if the boat has set out in the storm, what then is the use of fearing the raging currents?

The very same Hurr who had escaped from his army like a thief was now pressing forward, towards the enemy's forces, with a stride that exuded an unusual splendour and magnificence. His gaze, which before coming here was lowered in shame and regret, was now sparkling with the luminosity of faith, his face was shining with dignity. With the bow firmly secured on his shoulder, the naked sword firmly in his grip, the head of the spear raised like a cobra's hood, as if its being had been suddenly transformed, Hurr moved with renewed faith.

The enemy's forces observed him apprehensively. He was not Omar Ibn Sa'ad's obedient subordinate anymore, nor was he an instrument of the regime. Now he was truly 'hurr', free. At this moment he was a supporter of the Prophet's family and the flag-bearer of virtue, a treasured friend of Imam Husain. He was not going to usurp anyone's rights. He was going to fight tyranny and repression on behalf of the oppressed, helpless, innocent, and peace-loving people.

The soldiers had not yet seen the new Hurr and so they were dreading confronting his sword. Fear made them weak, they shivered like blades of grass. An ordinary, unremarkable man had turned into a thundering, surging storm. Hurr saw that the soldiers were embarrassed and afraid. He challenged them in a strong voice: "Why are you looking at my face like fools? Don't you know I have been reborn? I am not the same Hurr who was drifting in filth till a short while ago. At this moment, I am a simple follower of Imam Husain Ibn Ali, but compared to you I am distinguished and I have a higher status. Do you see this brilliant radiance on my face? I have just kissed the feet of my Imam. When he lifted and embraced me, I was filled with a strength that you cannot even imagine. You fools, you are only mounds of clay! You want to extinguish the light of the Prophet, you are bent on depriving the world of the light of faith and virtue. Don't you wonder how you will face your Creator after you have stained your bodies with the Imam's blood?"

Hurr's words weakened the resolve of the soldiers, their courage floundered. They quaked at the thought of the horrors of hell, the swords in their hands shook, and the standards were lowered. It was as if lightening had struck and singed the entire army.

Omar Ibn Sa'ad was anxiously pacing among the ranks. He spurred his men, but it was as if they had lost their hearing, they were lifeless.

"You cowards, come to your senses. This traitor is tricking you, don't be duped by what he says. God's blessings are with our Caliph. You are afraid of one man. I am warning you, no one should take a step back."

But the unsteady, frightened soldiers were falling like dry withered leaves in front of Hurr. Their desire to fight had died. They praised Hurr's support of the Imam, they egged him on.

Omar Ibn Sa'ad screamed and shouted like a madman. Finally, he ordered his special force to surround Hurr and crush him. Seeing Hurr besieged, the Imam's companions became agitated.

"Master, give me permission to go to Hurr's aid."

Abbas had barely uttered these words when Hurr fell from his horse. The Imam signaled some of his companions and rode forward towards Hurr. The moment the soldiers saw him approaching they dispersed like clouds.

Many in the army were Hurr's friends and companions. The special force advanced towards them to intercept any disturbance and even subdue some of the rebellious young men. The soldiers moved back.

The Imam found Hurr drenched in blood and covered in dust. Habib Ibn Mazahir quickly propped up the brave warrior and lifted his head. Tears began to flow from his eyes.

"You outdid the Imam's relatives and his childhood comrades, my friend! You surpassed all of us. You are fortunate that of all those who are ready to give up their lives defending the Imam, you are the first." Habib Ibn Mazahir wept openly.

The Imam placed Hurr's head against his chest and kissed his blood-stained forehead. With a corner of his cloak he wiped his blood and sweat. Hurr opened his eyes for a moment and smiled. He looked closely at the Imam's face.

"By God, how fortunate am I to have my head resting on the Imam's chest, his tears falling on my face. Oh God, you are witness that I turned away from the darkness and advanced towards your light. This worthless speck has become the sun today. Ya Imam, please cover my body, I am cold, I feel drowsy," he said, and with a smile he took his last breath in the arms of the Imam.

Hurr's young son used to ride alongside him in battle. After his father's rebellious actions, he had been watching his every move. One of Hurr's brothers, Musib Ab also held a prominent position in the army, but he and Hurr were known to have differences of opinion. He had regarded Hurr's actions as foolhardy; he thought Hurr was mad to do what he did. The son, too, had not spoken up for his father. These were strange times when all genteel and gracious relationships had been diminished, and interactions remained anchored in self-serving deals and profit. Brothers would trade each other's lives without any qualms. But there were traces of humanity left in Hurr's conscience, which were further enhanced by Imam Husain's sincerity and affection. When Hurr's son saw his father fall off the horse, he was overcome with feeling. So distressed was he that without any thought he spurred his horse and was gone in an instant. A few soldiers tried to stop him but then they held back thinking that he had galloped off to pick up his father's body. When Imam Husain's companions saw him

approaching they prepared to attack him. The son jumped off his horse and fell over his father's dead body.

Hurr's brother, Musib Ab was watching this from the other side. Suddenly, he pulled out his sword from the scabbard and rode out from the ranks. Everyone thought he was going to bring his nephew back—the young man was not just his nephew but his son-in-law, too. Only a few days back, his daughter had been married to Hurr's son.

When Musib Ab came closer, he was stunned to see Hurr's son, his cherished son-in-law, at the Imam's feet, begging for permission to fight.

"How remiss is the son who supports his father's murderers. Ya Imam, my blood is boiling, please give me permission to fight."

"I will never be able to free myself from the burden of your father's act of benevolence. But you do not have to fight, my son."

"In God's name, please don't deprive me from serving my father."

"Go son, if that indeed is your wish. How can I stop you? May God protect you."

Hurr's son pulled out his sword and turned, but he hesitated when he saw his uncle.

People from both sides were observing this drama unfold. The swords of both the uncle and nephew were drawn.

Musib alighted from his horse. The two men stared at each other for a long time. Then Musib Ab lowered his eyes. He put his sword back in the scabbard. He came forward, kissed the Imam's feet, then he kissed his deceased brother's forehead.

"We were together in life, what power does death have to separate us now? O, Imam, I don't have time to beg

for forgiveness, my actions will be my salvation. Give me permission to go into battle, it will be a way for me to receive forgiveness. And it's not just me, but the enemy's forces you see, their bodies are weak but their hearts bow in submission to you."

Deeply moved, the Imam held back his tears. He smiled and said to Habib Ibn Mazahir: "Do you see these miracles? Do you see where our sympathisers are coming from?"

The uncle and nephew embraced each other for the last time, got on their horses and, in the next instant, charged towards the enemy's forces. Because of the distance between the camps, the army hadn't been able to make out what had transpired between Musib and the Imam. When they saw him and his nephew return they didn't suspect anything. However, when Musib came closer he issued a challenge loudly, "My brother's killers, until a few moments ago, like you I was blind, deaf and mute. God took mercy on me and blessed me with discernment and now I can hear and speak once again. Today, when brother is trampling brother under the hooves of horses, it is no less horrifying than the Day of Judgement. Abandoning their principles, their faith and good judgment, people have surrendered themselves to the hungry beasts of power. But listen carefully, before you even try to harm Imam Husain Ibn Ali and his family, you will have to deal with us. Come and fight us, if you have the courage."

Musib and his nephew fought valiantly and were martyred. After this, Ali Akbar insisted on obtaining permission to fight, but the Imam's companions insisted they would go next. They implored passionately, "Ya Imam, we will give up our lives for you. Our blood will be sacrificed

for your blood, our soul for your soul. We promise that as long as there is breath in our bodies, no one can dare to come close to you."

Husain Ibn Ali's companions fought bravely and one by one they were martyred. Jaun Abu Zar, who was very old, repeatedly requested the Imam to grant him permission to fight.

The Imam said, "Jaun Abu Zar, due to your age, you are under no obligation to undertake jihad. It is my wish that you quietly leave from here."

"Ya Husain, I have been by your side in happy times and now in adversity you are depriving me of your companionship." Jaun Abu Zar began to weep. A Habshi by birth he said, "Am I not worthy of finding a place in Paradise as a martyr because my colour is black and my lineage is lowly? Can a slave not do jihad?"

The Imam said affectionately, "In Paradise, it will be the actions that are judged, not race or colour. And having spent so much time with you, I can assure you that you will have a high place in Paradise. Someone as compassionate, virtuous and self-disciplined as you will be hard to find. But if you have made up your mind to fight, I will not stop you."

Despite his years, Jaun Abu Zar showed such remarkable skill with his sword and spear that very soon the enemy was reeling. When, weak and unstable from his injuries, he fell off his horse, the Imam leapt forward and held him in his arms. That was when Jaun Abu Zar breathed his last.

Abbas Ibn Ali's three brothers, Jafar, Osman, and Muhammad, who had most eagerly sought permission to fight, killed large numbers of soldiers in the enemy's army

before they were martyred. Their older brother, Abbas had prepared them for battle with the proper weapons and sent them to fight with his blessings.

When Ali Ibn Abi Talib had decided to marry again, after the passing of Hazrat Fatima Zehra, he had requested his brother, Aqeel to suggest a woman who was virtuous and intelligent, someone who would be a good mother to his brave and intelligent children. Aqeel had told him about Ummul Buneen. She was the daughter of Hizam Ibn Khalid Ibn Rabi'a. Her tribe was famous for its extraordinary courage. Ummul Buneen had been raised with the highest standards and her status in terms of scholarly talents and virtuous qualities was beyond compare. Her name was Fatima Wahidiya. But after she gave birth to four sons, she came to be known as Ummul Buneen, the "mother of sons".

The eldest was Abul Fazl Abbas, who was devoted to Imam Husain and was his beloved brother and student. The affection he received from Imam Husain he passed on to his own younger brothers, Jafar, Osman and Muhammad. He loved them like sons and gave them the best education and training. They were among the thirty young men who, under Abbas's supervision, had become Imam Husain's bodyguards who followed him everywhere like a shadow.

On the day of Ashura, when most of the Imam's companions and friends had already been martyred, Abbas gathered his brothers and said, "It is my wish that you go into battle before me and give up your lives for our master."

The three brothers first went to pay their respects to the Imam and then rode out into the battlefield. Ali's sons called out the sacred name of their father and proved that they had

indeed inherited his valour and courage. When they were killed, Imam Husain picked up the bodies of his beloved brothers with Abul Fazl Abbas's help, and set them down in the tent along with the other martyrs.

When all the companions and friends of the Imam had laid down their lives for their master, Abul Fazl Abbas, Ali Akbar and Qasim Ibn Hasan began arguing about who had the greatest right to go next.

Zainab Bint Ali, too, was anxious, "Oh God, what is the matter with Aun and Muhammad? My sons are going to embarrass me in front of my brother. Everyone is eager to fight and they are standing like mute spectators. When will they be presented with another opportunity like this? The world will remember the boys as cowards, who became nervous at the last minute and hid in a corner to save themselves."

But Imam Husain comforted her. And Bano said, "They are just boys, they have never left the house nor have they ever seen a battle before. These children are lions, they have no fear."

"Ammi Jaan," the boys protested, "we have been trying to persuade Mamu Jaan, but he won't give us permission." The boys were in tears, "Tell us, what we should do?"

"Complaining that Mamu Jaan isn't giving permission is an excuse. Those who are truly courageous cannot be stopped. I know you are afraid of death. This is not how the children of brave parents behave. Body after body has been coming in since the morning, and you are standing here, staring at my face."

Bano explained, "The children are right. How can the Imam give them permission to fight? Jihad is not an obligation at their age."

"That is not the issue, Mumani Jaan," the boys said. "We heard Mamu Jaan telling Qasim Bhai that this is a different kind of battle. The restriction of age has been lifted. Even Ali Asghar is being counted among the ranks. Then, why can't we fight?"

Bano fearfully held the weary, sobbing Ali Asghar to her bosom.

"Why should I not get angry then?" Zainab said. "You are deliberately not seeking permission. Oh God, how I had prayed that my beloved sons successfully pass this test. That is all I desire. But anyway, do as you please. From this day on, you are not my children and I am not your mother."

At that moment, a commotion broke out. The enemy had launched an all out attack and arrows were raining on Husain's camp. Aun and Muhammad forgot they were children. Their blood boiled as they saw the enemy advance towards the tents of their mothers and sisters. Agitated, they fell at the Imam's feet.

"Mamu Jaan, for God's sake, please grant us permission. We can no longer bear this insult. All your close friends and companions have been martyred while we have been standing around. Amma Jaan cannot bear to look at our faces. We are embarrassed to go to her tent. She says we are cowards, that we are afraid of death. We are the grandsons of the Lion of God from our mother's side and the grandsons of Jafar Tayyar from our father's side. What do we care about death?"

The Imam looked at them both, his eyes filled with tears, and then he lowered his head.

"I do not have the heart to give you permission. You are very young. I cannot undertake such an act of cruelty. You are the light of my grief-stricken sister's eyes, her support. How can I send you to your death?"

"No Mamu Jaan, our mother is very brave. She may be a woman but she is more courageous than men. Last night she was saying, 'Don't think because I love you I will forgive your every mistake with eyes closed. My children are not dearer to me than my brother. If you hesitate to sacrifice your life for him, I will never forgive you.' Mamu Jaan, our lives are not worth living if we cause Amma pain."

Very reluctantly and unhappily, the Imam gave the boys his permission.

"Go, my beloved children, everyone is leaving. There will be no one left to carry my corpse. May Allah protect you. There is no other alternative. We all have to go one by one."

The children ran to their mother with joyful excitement.

Fizza heard the Imam's words and, stumbling, she ran after them.

"Look, Bibi, the children have received permission to go to death's door. O people, my Zainab's wealth is about to be lost forever."

But Fizza's feeble voice hadn't reached Zainab's ears.

"To whom shall I complain? This was written in my fate. May God protect us. Those who were strangers have sacrificed their lives and these two, who are the beloved of their uncle, are hiding their faces and staying out of sight. Tell me, who was Hurr to us? What relationship did we have with his brother and his son? They were strangers, but their sacrifice has granted them a status higher than those who are our own."

The children saw her face turned in anger and hesitated. They had been shedding tears of joy, but when their mother saw them she got annoyed.

"Why are you crying? Am I dead? You know, it's about how much one loves, not about forcing anyone. When

my brother is martyred, only then will these boys show the marvels of their swordsmanship. When everyone is slain perhaps then their turn will come. How can they call themselves Ali's grandsons? What great achievements do they have to their name that they can proudly say, 'My father is a king.' Why are you still standing here, get away from my sight. I cannot face anyone now."

At that moment the Imam entered her tent so that he could persuade his sister to not send the children to fight. But when he saw her scolding the boys, while they wept silently, without uttering a word in their defence, he quickly stopped her.

"Please, do not say anything further sister. Only those who are truly fortunate have such children. You are reprimanding them for no reason. They were telling you the truth. They had been insisting repeatedly but it was I who would not give them permission. You are their mother, you can be angry with them or show them love, but for God's sake, do not be unreasonable. They have come to take your leave, they are here to pay their respects for the last time. If you unintentionally break their hearts at this time, you will regret your actions for the rest of your life."

"I am angry that they hesitated until now. They could have insisted that you give them your permission earlier, as they have so easily received it now. And I have a grievance against you, too. Did you keep them from fulfilling their duty because you do not consider them your own?"

"Sending them out to fight those tyrants makes my heart ache with great sorrow. I would never, ever have agreed, but for your insistence and their stubbornnes. Come now, say your goodbyes."

The mother looked at her children lovingly and extended her arms, as if they had just returned from having won Qarun's treasure.* The children ran to embrace her.

"Felicitations, my princes, make me proud. Show them your swordsmanship like grown men. Let not people say that Zainab's sons turned their back on the enemy."

Zainab quickly helped the boys get ready, dressing them in new clothes, combing their hair. The cousin-sisters came and, one by one, they helped them with their weapons, fixed their turbans, tied their shoe laces.

"Bhai, don't leave anyone alive. Open up the barriers to the river, then we will drink water to our hearts' content." The thirsting Sakina saw water everywhere.

"Sure, there are only the two of you while there are thousands of them, but those cowards can't even compare to the dust on your shoes," Kubra Bint Husain remarked.

"They are troublemakers, they have sold their conscience, you are the standard bearers of truth," said Bano.

Umme Kulsoom added, "Just remember, this is a battle between good and evil. Good always triumphs. Your martyrdom will be your victory. You will be gone, but your name will be remembered for time to come. Those who honour truth will always bless you." Kissing their foreheads, she blessed them.

Zainab explained to her sons, "Dying honourably is far better than living a thousand years in disgrace and dishonour. I know, my children, that you have been thirsty

* Qarun, according to the Qu'ran, was a wealthy man from the nation of Moses and became very arrogant due to pride and arrogance. His wealth is legendary.

for three days, but don't you dare glance in the direction of the river. Even if you collapse and fall, stay away from the water. Having water is wrong for us as long as the Imam is thirsty, as long as Sakina's throat is parched, and little Asghar is pining for a drink. We can't quench our thirst while their throats are dry."

"Don't worry Amma, we won't allow our eyes to even stray towards the river. When we are killed, do not cry on seeing our dead bodies. Now give us your blessing so that we can go. We are worried that the enemy's forces might think they can get the better of us when they see there is no one to challenge them."

Zainab held them tightly to her bosom, as only a mother can, gave them blessings for a long life, kissed their faces and then bid them farewell. The moment they had left she raised her hands in supplication. "O, Protector of the World, accept this humble offering from me."

Aun and Muhammad were the same age. They were half-brothers. One of them was the son of Zainab's husband's second wife, who, at the time of childbirth, had taken ill and could not nurse her son. It was Zainab who had nursed him and raised him. She had forgotten the difference between them and could not even remember which one was her own and which one was not. Nor were the children aware of this fact. They had never noticed any difference in the way they were brought up. So much so, that when the time came to send them off to sacrifice their life for her brother she did not think it necessary to ask permission from the other mother.

When the young boy-warriors strutted out majestically, Abbas, Ali Akbar and Qasim came forward to help them mount their steeds. Holding the reins, the Imam led them forward, then kissed and embraced them both. The children

were in a hurry. They were afraid that the elders might change their mind. In an instant, the two shining stars were lost in clouds of dust.

The Imam wiped his tears with the sleeve of his cloak and saw his sister standing at the entrance to her tent, searching for a glimpse of her beloved sons.

What can one say about these children? For them, even facing the worst storm was child's play. Aun and Muhammad's innocent eyes had witnessed scenes of death and destruction since early childhood and the two boys were older than their years. Innocent people executed in the middle of the town square, soldiers whipping honest men, people killed and their heads displayed on the walls of the mosque—the children had grown up seeing such gruesome, unjust acts.

They had never wasted their time in playing and wandering aimlessly in the streets. From the beginning, it had been impressed upon them that they were unlike other children. Most of their time was spent in studying and gaining mastery in fencing. Abul Fazl Abbas was the leader of these young fighters. They had to practice every day. Often, the authorities tried to hinder their activities, accusing them of building a secret army, alleging that soldiers were being trained to rebel against the government. However, since there was no proof, the investigations were later dropped.

The Imam's warriors had already created terror in the hearts of the enemy's forces. Strange stories were circulating—one in particular was that they had been trained in a unique style of swordsmanship which ordinary humans knew nothing of.

But when Aun and Muhammad galloped into the battlefield, the troops stared at them aghast, their mouths gaping. True, they had come to fight traitors, but no one had come to kill children. Brave warriors fight brave warriors.

What a strange dilemma this was. On one side were fierce, strong combatants, covered from head to toe in armour, equipped with all kinds of weapons, on the other were young children, who had not had any water for three days but regarded even wetting their lips with their tongues an insult to themselves. And these children had to be slaughtered, their blood had to be spilled because this was the command of the governor, the call of the day.

The valiant warriors hung their heads in shame. They were embarrassed of their tall, strapping bodies, they were reluctant to raise their hands to attack the boys, nine- and ten-year-old children whose milk teeth had not yet fallen, whose faces were so beautiful, foreheads so luminous. The presence of these children had imbued the battlefield with fragrance.

"Is this a joke? Go away from here, boys. If you even get slapped by accident, your mother will cry with her head in her hands," said an insolent soldier, laughing.

"Hold your tongue! Do you even know who our mother is? The Lion of God's brave daughter, Zainab, and I am Aun."

"I am Muhammad.

"We are the grandsons of Ali Ibn Abi Talib, and Jafar Tayyar from our father's side. Don't be fooled by our age, come and test the mettle of our swords. We have lived for the truth, and today we are here to sacrifice our lives for the truth. But the determination to rid this world of your impure existence comes first."

Two streaks of lightening struck, two flames leapt forward in the storm, and the enemy's forces were in a daze.

The boys delivered one strike after another. In the beginning, the soldiers regarded it an insult to take these

boys seriously. Why become an object of ridicule by engaging with children? Also, the thought of their special status compelled the soldiers to lower their swords, and when the boys revealed their extraordinary swordsmanship, they held up their shields. Even though they were cold-hearted and callous they were hesitating because they had never attacked children before.

Well-trained horses, their hands expert in handling swords—the children finally forced the soldiers to retaliate.

After witnessing their courage and exceptional swordsmanship, even the enemy could not stop themselves from praising them. Ibn Sa'ad frowned disapprovingly.

“End this drama!” he roared and ordered that the boys be arrested. But that proved more difficult than catching lightning in one’s fist. They would swiftly rip through the columns, creating havoc, and then escape unhurt. For a moment the boys would get separated, then as they would call each other’s name their horses would gallop towards one another, they would touch each other’s hands to make sure the other was all right, and raise a shout of approval for the other’s sword-fighting.

The time had now come for them to be wounded, injured. Blood flowed from their injuries, but their courage was soaring, their determination full of youthful vigour.

People in Husain’s camp watched them with tearful eyes. The curtain at the entrance of Zainab’s tent would slip from her trembling hands and then, filled with anguish, she would grab it again with both hands. Her eyes were dry, her heart bled, the impact of each assault on the children’s bodies was felt deeply on the mother’s heart.

“Don’t look at the water, Amma’s eyes are fixed on us,” said Aun to Muhammad.

Muhammad replied, "I am very thirsty. If we could just sip a little water, we would show the enemy a thing or two. But I won't look at the river, I promise. Would it be a crime to get a palmful of water for Ali Asghar? The river won't shrink in size."

Abul Fazl Abbas was very agitated. He said repeatedly, "Master, if you let me, I will go and persuade the two to come back."

Ali Akbar interjected, "No, I should go. They are my students, they won't refuse my request. The children are losing their strength."

"Qasim, you accompany them, too. All three of you go and bring them back. I can no longer endure the sight of their injuries." Sighing deeply, the Imam gave the command.

"If anyone tries to stop my children from doing what they have been ordered to do, I will step outside my tent with my head uncovered," Zainab glared at everyone, her eyes blazing with anger. "They will come back on their own, they will ride back fearlessly. My sons will return like brave warriors, on the shoulders of their dear ones."

"For God's sake, these children are your support, Phupi Amma. They will soon fall on the sand and breathe their last."

"God forbid, why would I be without support? May Allah bless my brother with a long life. My children are nothing compared to my brother. If I had a thousand sons I would have sacrificed them all for Husain. Do not hurt my feelings by being obstinate. Abbas, I know Aun and Muhammad are no less dear to you than your own children, but today is the day we sacrifice our near and dear ones. If you don't want to think of it as my sacrifice, then think of it as yours. One can't take back a sacrifice. All I pray for is that it is accepted by God."

At last, the boys succumbed to their injuries and fell from their horses. But they continued to protect each other from the onslaught. No one could bear to see them suffer any longer. The Imam spurred his horse; Abbas, Qasim and Ali Akbar also rode towards them with speed. Seeing them approaching, the soldiers fell back fearfully.

The children were dying. As the Imam lifted them and embraced them he was covered in their blood. The children put their arms around their uncle's neck and breathed their last.

With the help of his brother and son, the Imam brought them back to the camp. Zainab Bint Ali opened her arms as if she was receiving the greatest reward of her life. She placed the boys on her knees and wiped their faces covered in sand and blood with her chadar. Then she sat with her face on theirs and said, "By God, why are you sleeping so deeply? Don't you know Mamu Jaan is standing here, can't you see him? My precious ones, you have fulfilled your father's duty as well."

All the women of the Prophet's family took off their chadars in mourning and with their heads lowered, sat near Zainab.

"What happened? Has someone died? Why are you grieving? No, my dear women, my beloved sons have not died. No, today, they have become immortal. They could have succumbed to cholera or the plague could have taken them away. I am a very fortunate mother. Do you not see? My dear sons are like lions, they have shown the enemy that there are strong and courageous warriors in Husain's army."

"Zainab, Zainab, life is not worth living any more. Drenched in the blood of these innocent children I am burning from head to toe. For God's sake, let me go now. I

know that my death will quell the anger of these villains. The few lives that remain will be saved. This will be a blessing."

The rewards that Zainab had accumulated in ten years were depleted with the martyrdom of Aun and Muhammad. Her womb was bloodied. Seeing her in this condition, Qasim's mother's head was lowered in shame. Corpse after corpse had been arriving since the morning and she had sat quietly in a corner, hiding her face from everyone. Now, her courage failed her. She was thinking, "O God, Zainab's sacrifice has been accepted and I'm keeping my precious son out of everyone's sight. A brother's right comes before a sister's. Qasim should have gone first. How will I show my face to Fatima Zehra on the Day of Judgement? I'm filled with shame when I face Zainab, everyone has gone. Now, before the Imam, it is Ali Akbar and Abbas's turn. Will it be my precious son's turn only when these two are also gone? No, they are the support of the entire family, they are the Imam's support. Abbas is the standard-bearer—will Qasim come to his senses when our flag is lowered?" Agitated, she got up hurriedly, sent for her son and asked him lovingly, "My dearest one, why are you waiting? Your uncle has done his duty, he has bestowed upon you the privilege of becoming his son-in-law. This was your father's desire. Now you have to fulfill your duty. My honour is in your hands, my beloved son."

Qasim replied passionately, "Ammi, I have been insisting since early this morning, I have been begging, but Chacha Jaan will not grant me permission. However, I have now decided that even if it is considered discourteous, under no circumstances will I let Abbas Ibn Ali, my teacher, my mentor, go first."

"All right, go and quickly say goodbye to your bride and I will go to the Imam and plead your case. To this day, he has never refused me anything."

Feeling a little diffident, Qasim came to meet his young bride of one night for the last time. They had known each other since they were children. They were aware of the decision the elders had made about their future, that they would be married when they were adults. They were raised in the same household, had played together and received the same education. In any case, all the members of the Prophet's family doted on each other, they were very close and connected to one another. After marriage, the bond between Qasim and Fatima Kubra was strengthened even further. The Imam had arranged a nikah between Kubra and Qasim Ibn Hasan in accordance with his older brother's wishes. These were strange times and this was indeed an unusual wedding.

When Qasim Ibn Hasan stepped inside the tent, the thought of asking his childhood companion, his bride of one night, to give him permission to die, made him tremble violently. This was the end of their short life together. Circumstances were separating them. This was the last time they were going to talk to each other as husband and wife. There were tears in his eyes, pain gripped his heart, and he couldn't speak. The moment the bride saw Qasim, she pulled her chadar over her hair and hid her face in her hands. Qasim's heart was pounding. He stood there unmoving, staring at her small hands and feet adorned with henna. His lips were parched from three days of thirst, his tongue was dry and prickly. With difficulty he said, "The wedding was not meant to bring us good fortune. You tell

me, what should I do? Should I abandon Chacha Jaan and go off somewhere and hide? Should he be slain, drenched in his own blood, while I live? Please say something, I am going to the place from where no one returns. Let me see your face properly for a moment. When will I ever get this opportunity again?"

Bint Husain covered her eyes with her palms and broke into sobs.

"By God, will you continue to be bashful in the presence of this traveller who is on his way to the land of death? This is heartbreaking. I don't even have enough time to comfort you. The call of death is echoing in my ears, I don't want to leave you and go, but it is written in our destiny that we must be separated."

Kubra still didn't speak. She felt her life ebb away, a knife seemed to slash her heart, and a cloud of widowhood that was to be her fate spread across her face.

"Please say something, my ears long to hear the sound of your voice."

Kubra moved her hands. Nervously, she lifted her eyes, tried to speak, but couldn't form words, then she lowered her gaze once again.

"All right, so when my body arrives from the battlefield will you still sit quietly, feeling bashful? You won't lament and mourn?"

Finally, her restraint broke. The young bride burst into violent sobs. Her eyes brimming with tears, she pinned her gaze on him, all the anguish in her heart reflected in her eyes.

"What about the promise you made to spend your whole life with me? Have you forgotten everything? Did you hold my hand just so that you could abandon me in the middle

of this maelstrom? From the moment I saw you, no one else ever had a place in my heart."

"I, too, have always considered you my whole world."

"If you are leaving, at least tell me how am I to go on living after you are gone."

"Kubra Bint Husain, you are the brave daughter of a brave father. Please send me off happily, do not weep. How beautiful life seemed after I found you, now my heart bleeds at the thought of losing you. But there is no other recourse. Death is envious of our happiness, we were not destined to be together. O, daughter of my uncle, by God, I do not want to die! I just want to be by your side for the rest of my life and look at you. But very soon these eyes will lose their sight, this world will fall apart. I will miss you even in Paradise. I will miss the house in Medina, the streets of Mecca, your tinkling laughter, your mischievousness, and the sudden seriousness with which you get caught up in the philosophy of life and death..."

"I wish I was as fortunate as the dried flowers of the sehra in your hair that will go with you to the battlefield. The moment you leave I will cease to live."

"No, no, who will lament over my body if you are not there? Who will mourn for me? The fear of death wanes when I imagine you with your hair disheveled, your tearful eyes grieving for me. Please, my love, smile one last time, your smile will be the light that illuminates my dark paths."

Qasim's mother called out, "I say, my son, has the bride charmed your heart so much that you have forgotten your duty?"

Qasim was startled when he heard his mother's voice. Entreating, pleading, he pulled the sobbing Kubra away from his bosom and hastily left the room without a backward

glance. Kubra tried in vain to clutch at the hem of his cloak. Lamentation rose from the tents. The women beat their heads.

"Ahh, what is this injustice? A bride of one night will be widowed, an innocent girl's world is being destroyed."

"In God's name, don't utter these ominous words, what you see are the preparations for the wedding celebration of my beloved son," said Qasim's mother wiping away her tears.

When Qasim emerged from the tent, he found the Imam standing outside, looking mournful. Qasim became apprehensive. Would the sobs and lamentations of the women make the Imam change his mind, would he stop him from going into battle? Agitated, he fell at the Imam's feet.

"Chacha Jaan, I plead with you in Baba Jaan's name, don't stop me now. For God's sake, give me leave."

Qasim's mother spoke, "Bhai, your widowed sister-in-law, too, has some right over you. Let him go."

Husain, I place Qasim in your protection. Give him a chance to prove himself, it is his right. Husain heard his brother's voice echoing in his ears.

The Imam embraced his nephew.

"If this is Allah's will, go, my dear one. I will have to suffer the pain of your separation as well. But what difference does it make? You go first and I will be right behind you, it's just an interval of a few more moments of life. This too must be written in our destiny, that I will destroy the wedded bliss of my beloved daughter with my own hands. Who can stop fate?"

Then he placed the turban on Qasim's head, arranging the two embroidered flaps on his chest, ripped his shirt collar (as one does a shroud), fastened the sword to his belt, and paused

for a moment before he said softly, "Qasim, take Kubra and slip away quietly from the back. No one will notice anything in this commotion. If you get to the tribe of Banu Sa'ad you will be out of danger. Both of you will be saved."

"But where will I go to escape my conscience? If you valued my life so much, you should have allowed me to be raised in the court of Damascus. Why did you nurture me in your blessed lap? I cannot obey your order."

"Don't let my words upset you, my prince. It is my duty to tell you that I have freed you from all your obligations. As far as I am concerned, you are free, you can go anywhere you wish."

"I reject every freedom in favour of becoming your slave."

The passionate glow of determination on his young nephew's face reminded the Imam of his deceased brother.

"My daughter is fortunate to have a husband like you, Qasim, even though this blessed union will be short-lived." The Imam choked with emotion.

Qasim Ibn Hasan spurred his horse. A bolt of lightning struck the ruthless army.

When they saw young Qasim, for a moment, the hearts of the tyrants softened. Childhood was departing; he was on the verge of manhood. Shining in his eyes like diamonds was the intoxicating thought of the bride who was with him for one night. The colour of henna on his palms had not yet faded, the dried flowers of his sehra were still entangled in his silky hair, he could still feel the warm touch of her trembling body in his arms. Leaving his tearful new bride, he was now on his way to embrace death. The armour looked awkward on his thin, lean frame. He looked like a child who had donned a disguise for fun. Why are good people forced to turn their back on the wonders of life and instead play the

game of death? The lust for land and power finds new and innovative ways of destroying peace and harmony.

When Qasim Ibn Hasan began reciting the verses on courage and valour in the battlefield, in a loud and passionate voice, those who heard the *rajz* felt as if molten steel was being poured into their ears, turning them into bleeding wounds. Their swords dropped from their hands. They felt as if they had lost the capacity to fight. The handsome youth's steed thundered over the weakened troops and, like a hurricane, he crushed the enemy forces. Flames burst forth from the young man's sword, as he slayed row upon row of fighters.

The waters of the River Furat turned red with blood.

Gripped by fear, Ibn Sa'ad called out to Arzak Shami.

"O great warrior of the land of Syria, why are you standing on the sidelines and watching? The troops are overwhelmed, its time to show your mettle. This storm won't be held back by spears and shields, nor can it be stopped by a hangman's a noose. Come forward, O mighty warrior, and impale this boy with your spear, finish him off. If you claim the head of this audacious child, you will be rewarded with anything your heart desires. You might know that Qasim is very important, he is Hasan's son and Husain's son-in-law. He is our master's foremost opponent. A two-fold fire burns in his heart; anger at his father's assassination and his ardent support for his uncle and father-in-law, Husain. In my opinion, you are the one who has the right to get us his head since you are are our army's greatest warrior."

Arzak Shami was an exceptionally powerful wrestler. With a single stroke of his sword he was able to topple column after column of soldiers. At the mere mention of his name, even the bravest of men lost their nerve and put down their

sword, mountains came crumbling down with the echo of his battle cry, birds dropped dead and the river retreated.

It was said that he could squeeze a trickle of water out of a steel rod by crushing it with his bare hands, and if he kicked the earth with all his might, it would split open and spew lava. With one hand on the bridle, he could haul a soldier along with his horse, spin him around and fling him back down with such great force that there would be no need for a burial as the soldier's body would sink several feet into the ground. A young boy like Qasim would be simply blown away with a mere a whiff of his breath. But when Arzak Shami heard Ibn Sa'ad's order he became angry.

"O, Amir, have you lost your mind? I knew his grandfather, Ali Ibn Abi Talib, and even though I was defeated by him, I was able to hold my head with pride since he was a man in whose presence mountains turned to black dust. I have defeated famous wrestlers and it is an insult to my capabilities as a soldier to go into combat with an inexperienced boy. The world will laugh at me. I'm someone who remains undaunted before the bravest of the brave and the strongest men. The mere sight of my sword blinds my opponents. It would be foolish to engage with a boy who doesn't even come upto my waist. I have four courageous sons who are experienced in the art of warfare and are brave lions. Send one of them. They will finish the job in no time."

Arzak Shami's four sons were presumed to be followers of the Prophet of God, but in reality they were Satan's cohorts. Upon seeing them, Ibn Sa'ad issued the order for attack. Pointing to the one who was the smallest, although he was still no less than the size of a small elephant, he said, "Go and sever the boy's head and present it to me. He is Hasan's son and Husain's son-in-law. It appears that he is

very proud of his status. When Husain's young daughter will lament over the body of her new bridegroom, only then will he regret having challenged us. Go and slaughter him without any qualms. You will be rewarded amply, Amirul Momineen will himself adorn you in robes of honour and place the turban of honour upon your head. When you present Qasim's head to the Caliph you will receive such enormous riches and prestige that your future generations, your children's children, will live in luxury. March ahead, my lion, for such moments are rare in life. There are thousands in this army ready to give up their faith and beliefs for this golden moment, but you are Arzak Shami's worthy son and I consider you the most fitting candidate for this task."

It was a clash between righteousness and evil. Every movement of Qasim Ibn Hasan's hands was guided by Allah, his bosom was ablaze with the passion of faith and devotion. One by one, Arzak's four sons went to fight him and each one was slain.

The death of four grown sons drove Arzak Shami mad. He seethed with anger and hatred. Breathing fire, he slaughtered anyone who came in his way, leaving a trail of death in his path, and ripping through the lines of soldiers, as he moved forward. With a large, heavy bow slung across his shoulder, his entire body covered in a suit of armour, he marched ahead, roaring and snarling. He looked like a fierce giant encased in an iron mesh. When the Imam saw this evil calamity approaching Qasim, all his hopes sank. He said despondently to Abbas, "Ahh, my brother, the story is over now. Hasan's orphaned child is on the verge of martyrdom. The very embodiment of death is approaching him, my daughter is about to become a widow."

Then he turned towards the Kaaba and prayed. "O, Creator of Heaven and Earth, O, Pure One, save my Qasim from the terror of Arzak Shami. You, who is the Saviour of the World, who is compassionate and merciful, save him, for he is the son of my martyred brother, he is the hope of an innocent young woman. Have mercy, O, Allah, I do not ask you for an eternal life for Qasim, I merely ask that he does not suffer death at the hands of this monster."

It was a memorable battle.

Coming from one direction were the fervent, heartfelt prayers of the Imam, while from the other side, the villainous Arzak Shami advanced toward Qasim and roared, "Be on your guard, schoolboy! I have ground to dust the sons of giants, a single glance from me is enough to cause armies to retreat. I am that terror from which there is no escape."

Qasim laughed and replied defiantly, "Do not talk nonsense. Allah does not like those who are boastful. Pride and arrogance always go down before a fall. I may be young, but my faith and my belief are greater than those of a sinner and transgressor like you. I am a follower of the Imam, prepared to lay down his life for the sake of truth. Do not disturb the harmony by screaming and shouting. If you have it in you, show what you can do. We will see what kind of an acrobat you are, we will find out who is big and who is small."

Infuriated, Arzak swooped in. Qasim shifted his horse slightly. The mountain slid past him.

Qasim laughed again.

"Your big body is a hinderance to you. Look, your horse cannot bear your weight. Be careful, it just might collapse with you on it. The poor creature carries the burden of innumerable corpses. He has to endure your bulk, also the unwieldiness of your armour and weapons. But the heaviest

burden is of death that you carry on your shoulders. God help you, you are weight and mass personified."

During their first encounter, young Qasim's nimbleness and Arzak Shami's clumsiness became apparent. Arzak's sword flew out of his hand and landed far. Irritated, he lifted his spear. One strike of Qasim's double-edged sword and it split into two.

Then Arzak held the bow in his hand and angrily began adjusting its string. But he was distracted by Qasim Ibn Hasan's piercing stare, which was sharper than an arrow, causing the string to slacken. Qasim burst out laughing and mocked Arzak, "You fool, you are only a heavy lump of meat. You idiot, why don't you do some exercise so that some of this fat can melt."

Arzak Shami's eyes bulged with rage and fury. He could no longer tolerate Qasim's retorts. His own soldiers were smirking now. Secretly, they were pleased to see the scoundrel being cut to size by the young boy. The vile wretch was always bullying everyone, trying to intimidate them with his giant body. Today, the truth about him was revealed and everyone was having fun at his expense.

The boys and girls in Imam Husain's camp were observing this spectacle. What a remarkable acrobat Qasim is, how he makes the bear dance to his tune. Abul Fazl Abbas also moved forward on his steed and keenly watched this comical contest. Again and again, he shouted impulsively, "God be praised! Wah! Congratulations, Qasim, my dear! Yes, this is the right moment, jab him from the left..."

Qasim's sword moved swiftly and Arzak's left ear fell off. Laughter rose from everywhere. Despite his anxiety, Ibn Sa'ad could not contain his smile. He was certain that Arzak would soon crush the boy like an ant. So what if he

had had an ear lopped off, that wouldn't affect the wrestler's strength, would it? It's a contest, it will set his mind straight. God knows what he thinks of himself.

Arzak was roaring. Hearing his own soldiers laugh enraged him further and his attacks became clumsier. His horse could no longer support his weight. There were moments when it seemed like he was about to collapse. Sometimes Arzak picked up one weapon, then finding it to be ineffective chose another. But when his second ear also fell off the laughter died down. Except for a few bold men no one was amused any more. Abul Fazl Abbas moved his horse closer.

"Enough playing around, my son," he called out. "You have not eaten or had any water in three days, end this show now."

"As you command, Master." Qasim's sword glinted and in one precise stroke he sliced the lumbering body into two.

"Well done!" shouts were heard from the Imam's tent. Abbas wept for joy.

"It is all because of your blessing, Uncle. With a teacher like you, even a lowly student like me can be victorious. And when my Imam's hand is behind me, victory is inevitable. I am so thirsty, Uncle, if only I could have a gulp or two of water, you would see thousands reduced to dust."

Yazid's army was stunned into silence the moment they saw a mighty warrior like Arzak fall. Something that had started as a joke had become a serious problem now. Suddenly, everyone was alert and they gaped at each other in shock. Fuming, seething with anger, Ibn Sa'ad started cursing and swearing furiously at the soldiers.

"You traitors, cowards, why are you standing around gaping? This boy is a spark of calamity, if you fight him one

by one, he will slice you up like carrots and radishes. You must all attack him at the same time. Strike without warning."

"But this goes against the Arab rules of battle, it is a sign of cowardice if a group goes after one person," the soldiers replied.

"Do you still doubt your cowardice? Isn't it evident that you are inept and spineless? If you care about your lives, forget the rules and attack now, together. Why are you worried? Look, while everyone's attention was focused on this spectacle, our lancers attacked the Imam's camp from the rear. It will all end shortly."

Saying this, Ibn Sa'ad pointed towards the tents with his sword. An attack on the tents from the rear! On the women's tents! The moment Qasim turned his back to see what was going on Ibn Sa'ad's special force attacked him.

Abul Fazl Abbas, who was riding towards the Imam's tent to share the news of Qasim's victory, turned around when he heard the clamour. But it was all over by then. Qasim Ibn Hasan's horse was without its rider, nothing was visible, the sky was black with dust and sand, a thousand swords glinted as they plunged into one point and then rose, covered in blood.

The Imam rushed anxiously towards the battlefield. The soldiers, taken by surprise at the sight of the Imam coming towards them without any weapon, turned around and fled. They ran until they were at a safe distance and then looked back like predatory vultures.

When the dust settled, the Imam saw Qasim crushed under the horses' hooves, half-buried in the sand, thrashing his legs in agony, his parched tongue hanging over his dry lips. The Imam bent down, held Qasim's face against his own and began sobbing like a child. The orphaned boy took

one last breath and fell into eternal sleep. His clothes were tattered, his face and body were heavily scarred.

When the Imam approached the camp with Qasim's body in his arms, Fizza began screaming like a mad woman: "O Women! If anyone wants to observe the purdah she should move away. By God's grace, the bridegroom comes for the *arsimus' haf*.* O girls, bring the bride, how careless these sisters are—place the hem of a chadar on your brother, the groom's head. O mother of the bride, I say woman, where are you, bring out the dowry..." Fizza, the old maid, suddenly paused her babble, stared wide-eyed at the body soaked in blood, fell at the Imam's feet and fainted.

The Imam placed Qasim's body before his sister-in-law and then said to his sister, "Zainab, go and bring the unfortunate girl here. Tell her, she need not be shy in my presence. She should see her groom one last time."

Suddenly, Sakina came in screaming. "Baba, Kubra is dead, she doesn't seem to be breathing anymore."

Qasim's mother was staring at her son's lifeless body with vacant eyes. Three nights of sleeplessness, hunger, thirst and the constant threat of death took a toll on her and she lost her senses. She babbled incoherently, "Qasim, my newly-wed son, get up. What will your aunt think? Get up, my beloved son, recite the *daruud*† with your hand on the bride's back. My precious, this deep slumber is not right. Turn this way, look at me, my beloved child. Allah, have you no thought for his bride either..."

* A wedding ritual where the bride and groom see each other's face in a mirror.

† Words in praise and honour of Prophet Muhammad.

When Kubra set her eyes on her bridegroom's body, she let out a blood-curdling scream and threw her head at his feet, wailing, "Forgive me, my prince, I was weak and shy. I was unable to utter a word when you were leaving. But this is a harsh punishment. Just once, let me hear you say, go you ill-fated Kubra, I forgive you."

Bano clutched her bosom, embraced her daughter and closed her eyes.

"What is this, my prince, did you become a bridegroom only to rest in the grave. Qasim, you have been so cruel, you gave my daughter, your young bride, the gift of tears and left her."

The Imam placed his hand on the head of his helpless, grief-stricken daughter. She fell at his feet.

"Baba, how unlucky I am, how unfortunate."

"No, my daughter, you are really fortunate. Only those who are lucky have husbands like Qasim. What if your husband had been one of the men in the enemy's army? Would you be proud of being such a man's wife?"

"No, Baba, do not wish such a frightening fate upon me. But Qasim detested black garments, how will I wear black clothes. O, no, do not break these bangles, Qasim had kissed them...aah, Ibn Hasan, I had not expected such a betrayal from you..."

"O death, what had I taken from you,
That you should snatch my life's flower from me
Never did I kill even an ant
Then why do I live with a living death!"

Qasim Ibn Hasan's death destroyed the Imam. His brother had left his son in his care with the belief that his life would be enriched. The Imam had raised him like his own son, provided him with the best education, taught him

swordsmanship, and then given him his beloved daughter in marriage.

In the end, he was also the one who gave him death!

There was a storm of sorrow weighing down the Imam's heart. With his head lowered, he sat alone in his tent. How many tents were now empty. The plain of Karbala was painted red with the bloodied corpses of his loved ones. Only a brother, Abbas, remained, and his own son, Ali Akbar. His other son was ailing and close to death, a son not devoured by death but trampled by sickness instead. The Prophet's progeny had been plundered and murdered.

The Imam's body trembled, weakened from starvation and thirst. His face was pallid, his lips parched, every breath was a lament, his heart was breaking, his hair was thick with sand, his hands stained with the blood of his near and dear ones. Was this any less real than actual death? His garments were drenched in the blood of his friends and relatives, his shoulders ached from lifting corpses. He had been dying, little by little, with each one of them.

In the meantime, Abbas was also suffering from intense grief and sorrow as was Ali Akbar, who was overcome with anguish and frustration. Life was a torture, a punishment, the head felt like a heavy burden upon the shoulders. Abbas wanted to go first to sacrifice his life for the Imam, but Ali Akbar was insisting that Abbas was dearer to the Imam than his own sons, and also, he was the standard bearer. Lowering the standard would mean conceding defeat. As long as the Imam was alive, he could not suffer defeat, the standard could not be lowered.

Abbas was saying, "No, Ali Akbar, Sajjad's life hangs in the balance and how long will Ali Asghar be able to endure the agony of thirst? You alone are left. You have to live, or

my Master's lineage will come to an end. The sorrow of your death will kill him."

"Our lineage will not fare well in this world now. I, too, am very selfish in this matter. I pray that I do not see him die. May Baba bury me with his own hands, this is my wish."

The Imam said, "God be praised! What wonderful blessings are indeed being showered on me! What else is left? Will I have to suffer the agony of your death as well? I think I will be the one to go now. Young men like you depart and I stay back to bear the sorrow of your loss? This ageing heart has no strength left to endure this pain. Let me go, I am very tired now. I cannot bear the burdens of this life anymore."

"This cannot be. Not a hair on your body can be harmed as long as we are here," Abbas and Ali Akbar said in unison.

Despite his turbulent state of mind, the Imam smiled.

"You think that I will continue living after you two are martyred? You both are dearer to me than my own life. It will be cruel to include me among the living after you are gone. Your death will be my death."

"Please forgive us, my Lord, but I will have to disobey you. Who can dare to threaten Husain while Abbas is still alive? Master, do not wait any longer, give one of us permission to go into battle. The enemy's forces are getting restless. They may stoop to insolence and finding us inattentive and negligent, attack the women's tents."

"But the question, my beloved boys, is which one of you should I pick? It is a difficult decision. Abbas, you were entrusted to me by the Lion of God. He placed you in my lap the moment you were born and said, 'Here Husain, he is yours.'"

"Yes, my Lord, when I first opened my eyes, it was your luminous face that I saw. I sat on your knee and heard stories of our great ancestors. I held your finger as you introduced me to the world, you educated me, trained me as a soldier. I have always regarded you as my mentor, my master, my Lord."

"I know Abbas, if you had not protected me I would have been killed a long time ago. I have fought this wretched battle with your help. Who will uphold the splendour of this standard after you are gone? The women and children also depend on you."

Suddenly, they heard laments and desperate cries from the women and children's tents. Abbas dashed out and was back within seconds. He was out of breath, there were tears streaming from his eyes.

"Lord, I do not wish to be the first to go into the battlefield, but I can no longer bear to hear the children's cries. No matter what happens, we have to try and get water."

"But my brother, you will have to cross the river of blood to get to the river for water."

"I know, Master, but there is no other recourse. In God's name, please give me leave to go. The moans and sobs of the children are driving me mad. I am not going with the intention of engaging in combat, I want to go so that I can get water for the little ones. Perhaps the enemy will take pity and I will be successful in fetching water."

"If this is what you believe dear brother, then you are expecting to draw out the elixir of life from a stone. I, too, can no longer bear to see the children suffer. They do not ask for gold and jewels, or the treasures of Qarun. All they want is a little water to moisten their parched throats. What

kind of an Imam am I that I do not have the means to fulfill this minor need of theirs? Abbas, I think it would be best that now I go to the battlefield. The matter will be resolved here and now. My blood will slake the enemy's thirst. You and Ali Akbar can take what remains of this family and migrate to some distant land, somewhere far from here."

"Do not make us break our promise, Baba. If you won't allow Chacha Abbas to go, then please give me permission to get water." Ali Akbar fell at his father's feet.

"I have fetched water earlier too, I promise I will not fight," said Abbas. "I will bow my head before them and beg for water. Ali Akbar, be vigilant in guarding the tents. The villains know that the way for them to unleash their tyranny and brutality has been cleared. Master, precious time is being wasted in this discussion. I beg you, in God's name, to give me permission to proceed."

"Go my brother, I leave you in God's care. Fetching water has just become an excuse for you to leave and I cannot stop you. Oh God, one can endure only so much helplessness."

The moment the news that Abul Fazl Abbas had been given permission to arrange for water reached the tents, those who were half-dead with thirst suddenly felt the stirrings of life. How beautiful is the word 'water.' Children who were in a stupor roused themselves, those who were listless became energised. They surrounded Abbas from all sides holding their copper cups, clay bowls, and jugs.

"Chacha Jaan, I can't even speak now, my tongue feels so prickly ... as if full of thorns," said the young Sakina, placing her head in his lap.

When Abbas's wife got the news of his departure, she shook from head to toe. Whispering into Fizza's ear, she said, "Will he leave without meeting me? For God's sake, please

tell him his son misses him. He should come and see him, hold him in his arms once."

The children were wailing, "Dear Chacha Jaan, for God's sake, please quench our thirst... Asghar is so listless he doesn't even have the energy to cry. Our hearts are burning with thirst now."

"My children, wait for just a little while longer, then you can drink all the water you want. I am not saying this just to appease you, I swear on my love for you, I will return with water."

Abbas's wife was trembling. She was too shy to look straight at him. She knew she would not be able to stop him.

Abbas came in and said, "Why have you undone your hair? Are you crying? Have you already started mourning for me? By God's grace, I'm still alive. Our son will be distressed when he sees you in this state. Why do you torment the hungry, thirsty child? You are the wife of a brave soldier, calm down and wipe your tears. Do you want me to take the memory of this sad face as I bid you farewell? Look at the others. Think of the young and gentle Aun and Muhammad, spare a thought for the corpse of the youthful Qasim, crushed under the hooves of stallions. Look how courageous my Master's daughter, Kubra is, no one has heard her voice. The Imam is already so distraught, he will be even more upset if he sees you crying. You should be proud of your destiny, your beloved husband is risking his life for such a noble cause, he is going to get water for thirsty children."

His wife's sobs did not cease. Abbas took her by the hand and sat her down next to him.

"What do you say, should we quietly sneak out from the back with our children? In all this commotion, no one will know that we are gone."

"Will God not know either?"

"And from there we can easily travel to Syria."

"Syria?"

"There, in the emperor's court we will receive great rewards and the highest position. You will live in luxury like a princess."

"God forbid, may your enemies be the ones to receive rewards in the emperor's court. May God bless our Imam with a long life. He is the king of kings, to die at his feet would be the highest honour. What kind of talk is this?" His wife broke into sobs again. "I am ready to become a widow rather than accept gifts from the court of Syria."

Abbas gathered his wife and son in his arms.

"My beloved, I was only testing you."

"A curse be upon such a test! Do I not know what is your status? Are you testing me because you do not trust me? But what can I do? This is a strangely bewildering moment. I know you are the standard bearer, the Imam's special envoy, and I too am his special servant. But my heart is filled with trepidation, I am plagued by fear, strange visions frighten me. I will not stop you. Go and bring water, the children are growing weaker."

Abbas gazed lovingly at his wife's face. Despite pressure from others he had not married a second time. It was customary to have many wives but Abbas adored his wife. Many women had sent him proposals of marriage, but he had not even considered them. Perhaps another reason for this was that he was so completely devoted to the Imam and focused on his goals that he had set aside all his other needs. Eating, sleeping, waking—he simply went through the motions to sustain the life that he had dedicated to the service of the Imam.

This was a time when the Arabs no longer cared for familial bonds, when the feeling of kinship was breaking down. The distinction between those whom one could call one's own and those who were outsiders was lost in the scramble for power and wealth. Everyone had become selfish and greedy. So, Abbas's loyalty towards his brother and his entire family was an oddity.

Ever since he was a child, Abbas had the habit of helping those who were suffering. He especially had great compassion for the weak, the elderly, and women and children. He could not bear to see them in distress. He was accustomed to doing physical labour and always showed a keen interest in farming alongside his father. When Imam Husain took Abbas's proposal to his prospective in-laws, he told them about his temperament and personality, "He is unique, but also hot-tempered. May God save us from his ire! But otherwise he is quiet and mild-mannered. His friendship is a gift from God. He has all the best qualities—love, consideration, loyalty. But my Abbas's anger is like the wrath of God."

People said, "What is this enigma? He's hot-tempered and also mild-mannered, fire and ice together?"

"Yes, that enigma is Abbas," said the Imam, laughing.

When Abbas Ibn Ali left his wife, she fell at Bano's feet and fainted. Abbas wiped his tears with his shirt sleeve and was about to step out of the tent without glancing back when he halted in surprise.

He saw his older sister, Zainab sitting at the entrance, leaning against the curtain.

"You are leaving without saying goodbye?" she complained.

"I was coming to you, yours was the last face I wanted to see before I left."

Holding on to the side of the tent for support, Zainab rose to her feet, came close to her brother, untied the fasteners of his cloak and kissed him on both shoulders.

"Go, Ibn Ali, may Allah be your protector and helper."

Abbas kissed his sister's hands and placed them on his forehead. How many times had these hands patted him to sleep and today they were stained with the blood of Aun and Muhammad.

When news of Abbas Ibn Ali entering the battlefield reached the enemy forces, a wave of fear and dread rippled through the ranks.

"Be vigilant, your death is approaching. Be ready for the tortures of hell, the magnificent son of the Lion of God is coming. How splendid he looks, even the brilliance of the sun pales in comparison to his glorious and heroic presence. Mountains and deserts are trembling, the universe is quaking with fear because the leader of those who have fearlessly sacrificed their life for the truth, the guiding force of the courageous, the master of the valiant, the Imam's standard-bearer, Ibn Ali is coming."

The Syrian forces cowered like a goat caught in the clutches of a lion! Weapons slipped from the soldiers' hands, their defences collapsed, and ranks were routed. The men became disoriented with fear. Their grip on their bows slackened, some blindly started swinging their swords and ended up hacking their own companions. No one knew what was happening. Father and son became strangers. Dear God, was this a battle or apocalypse! Alarmed, Ibn Sa'ad chastised his soldiers: "Is this what you call a calamity, my brave warriors? Are you going to retreat from your positions? You should hide your faces in disgrace. Are you not ashamed? Why is there fear and apprehension among

the ranks? This is the son of Ali Ibn Abi Talib whom we cleverly tricked. We were able to trap his father, remember, whereas he is just the son, hungry, thirsty and weary. Where can he escape? How difficult will it be to stop him? He is the son of the man who had crushed your fathers and grandfathers under his feet, who had destroyed them in the battlefield. Come, my warriors, come forward and take revenge for those killed in the Battle of Badr, fling him onto the ground, trample him under your horse's hooves and turn him into dust."

With the devil leading the way, the men went berserk. Like a dark cloud the army swelled and descended upon the banks of the river. The scattered ranks came together, the standards that had been lowered were raised once again, lances were hoisted high, and with their spears steady in their hands, the soldiers felt revitalised. As the men saw the others in their ranks regain their strength and confidence, their spirits too were uplifted, and balancing their maces the wrestlers also advanced.

Abul Fazal Abbas began reciting the verses of the *rajz*: "Open your eyes and observe carefully, for you will not get an opportunity later on. I am the son of the Lion of God, an ordinary servant of Imam Husain, and I am here to request you for water for the children. If you refuse, your denial will lead you to your death. Your fight is not with innocent children, they are not your enemies nor do they have anything to do with politics."

Ibn Sa'ad addressed Abul Fazl Abbas in a loud voice. "Ya Ibn Ali! If you want water then swear an oath of allegiance to our Caliph, or else remember, even if the baby, Ali Asghar comes crawling here himself, in the hope of getting water, he will be welcomed with swords, spears and lances. There

is still time, swear your allegiance and take as much water as you need from the river."

"O leader of fools," Abbas replied, "do you even know what it means to take an oath of allegiance? The oath is voluntary, without any pressure. An oath that is obtained through coercion, pressure and force is meaningless. A person pledging such an oath is a transgressor and the one who accepts it is an idiot."

"We have nothing to do with this discussion, we are simply doing what we have been commanded to do. If you value your life, then convince your Imam to stop being willful and make the right decision."

Abbas's anger erupted with its full force.

"O bastard child of Yazid! Control your tongue, do not challenge me. My war strategies are recognised all over the world. We can move mountains with a mere movement of the hand. O you beast with a villainous heart, what a cautionary moment this is when your donkeys and horses are frolicking about in the River Furat while the relatives of the one who drinks from the springs of Heaven yearn for a few drops of water. One can no longer bear to see the children suffering. Ali Asghar thrashed about all night from thirst, he doesn't even have the energy to cry now; Sakina is sick, her throat is dry and scratchy. O tyrant, what are you made of? In this heat, this scorching wind, the tents are as hot as an oven, every leaf in the Imam's garden is wilting one by one, hands are turning cold, the colour of the delicate cheeks of the children is now ashen, their lips are turning blue."

Ibn Sa'ad's face turned purple with fear. The irises of his eyes detached from their axis. He felt suffocated, breathless. Shimr saw the state he was in and galloped towards him,

scowling. He had been looking for an opportunity to apprehend him the moment he showed signs of weakening.

Ibn Sa'ad immediately pulled himself together. Shimr took control of the situation and after a boisterous laugh he addressed Abbas fiercely, "You will not get water like this. If the Imam holds the life of the children so dear then why is he refusing to take the oath of allegiance? The river is right here, with its waves surging. If his children are thirsty then it's his responsibility to ensure their thirst is quenched. The moment he pledges his allegiance, the river will be accessible to you all."

"You talk nonsense, you filthy animal!" Abbas roared. "May you perish, may your mouth be filled with dust. What are you and your Amir-e-Sham worth? Have emperors ever bowed before slaves? The Kaaba will never make way for the tavern. My master will not insult Islam by pledging allegiance to a depraved, tyrannical drunk. He will never throw away his life's wealth. You think he is weak and defenceless? If he so desired, the fountains of Heaven would flow at his feet. You do not fully comprehend the prominence of Fatima's beloved son, you do not know how exalted and great his stature is. His enemy is the enemy of the Prophet of God, the enemy of Islam, the enemy of all of humanity. You are a plunderer and a despot. Water is every living creature's right. The Imam's conscience cannot be sold for water."

"Take the water then if you have the guts." With that Shimr continued in a conciliatory tone, "Take pity on your youth, Abbas. You are my relative. A courageous soldier like you can bring the world to its knees, you can conquer the entire universe with your strength. You have been foolish to reject my message of peace. There is still time."

"You want to use the same bargaining tactics again, I see. But this soldier is not for sale, he will not be forced to trample the world under his feet. It is not our custom to attack just anyone simply because we have the power. We are the builders of this world, if necessary we will squeeze even the last drop of our blood to strengthen its foundations."

"You are not thinking of your innocent wife and children. Do you know what will happen to them when you are gone?"

"Their fate will be the same as the other daughters-in-law and daughters of Fatima Zehra."

Meanwhile, in the tent, young Sakina was weeping inconsolably with her arms around the Imam's neck.

"Ahh Baba, Chacha Jaan went to get water because I was being stubborn, I kept asking for water ... I am sorry, I won't do this again. I am no longer thirsty. Please, I beg you, bring Chacha Jaan back."

"My daughter, he will not return without the water," the Imam tried to pacify the little girl. "My precious child, don't cry. It will only make you feel worse."

In the battlefield, Abbas was saying to Shimr, "I am not here with the intention of fighting, I have come to get water for the innocent children. But if someone tries to stop me he will be in serious trouble. I will be forced to raise my sword to intercept him."

Then he turned his horse towards the river. Shimr rallied the troops and swords were unsheathed, spears lifted, the lancers aimed forward, and mallets were struck on the war drums as Karbala's heart began to throb.

When he heard the battle cry, the Imam emerged from his tent. He saw the standard held high and drew a sigh of relief. Abbas may have been surrounded from all sides,

but the standard he was holding onto clearly indicated his position. And wherever it moved, the standard not only diffused the darkness in its wake, it routed the ranks.

A strange kind of fear had spread among the soldiers. "This is a deception, this cannot be Abbas, it is Ali Ibn Abi Talib, the same height, the same radiant countenance, every glare a message of death, the same two-edged sword, the same assault that destroyed Khyber, the same agility and cunning of the horse. We had not been told that we would be fighting the Lion of God. We cannot fight Ali."

The army faltered.

"Are you mad? Ali Ibn Abi Talib was finished off with a dagger in the mosque by Ibn Muljim. Look carefully. This is Abbas. He hasn't eaten food or had a drop of water for three days. He is alone." Shimr Ibn Ziljaushan tried to reason with them, but the soldiers were awestruck and bewildered. They had lost the power to think clearly and rationally.

Taking advantage of the situation Abbas tore through the lines, reached the river and plunged his horse straight into the water.

An electric current rippled through his body the moment it came into contact with water. It was as if red hot metal had suddenly been dipped into water. Quickly regaining control of himself, Abbas bent down and filled the water-skin and secured its the opening with a leather cord. Then he cupped his hands and scooped up water to quench his thirst. As the coolness of the liquid travelled from his palm to his heart, he felt intoxicated, drowsy. He brought the water close to his mouth, its scent filled his heart and mind with fragrance.

In the next instant the faces of the thirsty innocents flashed before his eyes; the dying Ali Asghar, little Sakina

drooping like a pale, withering bud, baby Baqar Ibn Abbas sucking on the hem of his tiny shirt.

And the thirsty Imam!

His hand shook and the water spattered back into the river.

"Oh God, give me just enough time to take the water-skin back to the camp. The thirsty ones have placed great hope in me, do not let me fail them." He prayed as he swiftly came out from there.

Shimr shouted.

"Beware, young lions, don't let your prey escape. Remember, if the water reaches the tents I will make sure the Furat turns red with your blood. You, who are protectors of the Furat, surround Abbas while he is alone if you want to live."

The retreating soldiers halted in their tracks. Death was inevitable, whether it was at the hands of Abbas or their own men.

In any case, Abbas was alone. He had a water-skin in one hand and no shield to protect himself. His double-edged sword was also his shield. Swinging his sword around, protecting the water-skin from the torrent of arrows, forcing his way through the lines, Abbas kept charging forward on his horse. When the arrows came at him in waves, he tried to save the water-skin using his chest as a shield.

He could see the tents in the distance. Holding water bowls, the children were jumping up and down with excitement as if they had toys in their hands. Their mothers clutched at their shirts to hold them back when they tried to run in anticipation of the water that they could see coming their way.

There were times when he felt darkness engulfing his eyes, but Abbas Ibn Ali was not one to admit defeat. Despite his injuries he continued to forge ahead, until a tyrant struck him on the shoulder, hacking his arm off. For an instant, it seemed like the light in his eyes was going to be extinguished. He felt as if he would fall off his horse. The tents were just ahead now. If only he had a little more time. The journey's end was visible. Who knows whether it was his willpower or a miracle, but he managed to switch the water-skin bag onto his other hand the moment his arm was cut off. The horse sensed his master's helplessness; he used his hooves as a lance and sword, flames seemed to shoot from his eyes, anyone who came in his way turned into a lump of flesh. Bathed in his master's blood, the horse had become bloodthirsty. The soldiers around them were screaming and shouting, advancing like a swarm of ants.

Another attack followed and his second arm was also cut off. Abbas lost all feeling, although he was still in his senses. He held on to the water-skin with his teeth while the standard lay against his chest. But the water-skin was soon pierced by arrows and the water, mixed with Abbas's blood, spilled out. At this moment, a ruthless soldier struck Abbas's head with a sword and as it split open, his eyes filled with blood, and he fell from his horse.

The Imam clutched his chest and rose to his feet when he saw the standard fall. If Ali Akbar had not supported him he would have keeled over to the ground.

A strange kind of terror overpowered the enemy. The cowards started dispersing like retreating jackals, screaming in fear, sobbing violently, lamenting. In the commotion, many fell into the river and drowned, many lost their sanity

and ran amock swinging their swords, hewing each other into pieces. Since they were behaving like mad dogs, their own companions killed them to protect themselves.

As Abbas fell from his horse, he cried out, "My Lord, please help me."

Hearing his brother's voice, the Imam ran towards him without even putting on his turban. Ali Akbar helped him up as he repeatedly stumbled. Minutes seemed like years as they made their way to the river. They were weak and gasping for breath. Their destination seemed to be receding farther and farther away. Seeing them approaching, many soldiers hid their faces in their sleeves and ran from there, as though they had encountered poisoned daggers in the eyes of the defenseless Imam. He stumbled against something. Looking down, the Imam saw Abbas's arm. He picked it up, held it close to his breast and sobbed uncontrollably like a child.

Abbas called out frantically, "My Lord, where are you? I cannot see anything, the blood from the wound in my head has filled my eyes. I don't have hands to wipe it away. I will not be able to see my master for the last time. My last breath will remain caught in my chest until I do."

The Imam kneeled and wiped Abbas's eyes with the hem of his shirt. Then he held his face against Abbas's and said beseechingly, "You have always addressed me as Lord, I have longed to hear you call me 'Brother', grant me my wish Abbas, call me 'Bhai'."

"Bhai...Bhai...how fortunate am I that you are my brother."

As he waged his final battle with death Abbas said, "Bury me here, I have irrigated the banks of the Furat with my blood. My thirsty spirit will remain content near the

river, do not take me back to the tents. I am overcome by a sweet drowsiness...ahh, how beautiful the world is... what a beautiful song, how happy Baba is." A quiet sigh of contentment escaped his lips and then Abbas Ibn Ali fell into eternal slumber.

The Imam placed his arms on either side of Abbas's body, then he wrapped it carefully and secured it with his own belt. With the hem of his shirt he cleaned Abbas's face, carefully arranged his hair, and then supporting himself with his hands on his knees, he pulled himself up on his feet.

When Ali Akbar bent down to pick up the body, the Imam stopped him.

"No, let him sleep. He is very tired."

"If we don't take the body back to the camp everyone will rush out in distress. Look how Sakina is agonising, and Phupi Jaan will come out here in a frenzy, her feet bare."

"No, if the children see the severed arms they will go mad. Just take the standard of my standard bearer, and tie this damaged water-skin to it."

Ali Akbar picked up the blood-soaked standard of his beloved friend, uncle and mentor, but he did not raise it. Like a father shouldering his son's bier, the Imam helped support the standard and brought it back to the tents, resting it against a wooden shaft.

Everyone clung to the banner and lamented and mourned. Zainab's tears dried up when she observed the grief of her young sister-in-law. The ill-fated widow hid her face in the folds of the flag and tried to stifle the screams that escaped from her mouth. There was the day when Zainab had decked this sweet, shy girl as a bride with her own hands, she had doused her in the fragrance of musk and amber and dressed the parting in her hair with sandalwood. Today, the world

had filled that parting with dust. She was not in her senses. Her chadar had fallen off and she did not seem aware of anything around her. The Imam was standing with his head cast down. Zainab quietly sat down and held the young widow to her bosom.

“Who martyred our father’s standard?” Abbas’s young son rubbed his face against the flag, sobbing.

“Look at all the blood that flowed out of our water-skin,” said Sakina mournfully. “Where is my beloved uncle, I will complain to him about these tyrants. Oh God, they also slayed this defenseless water-skin.”

‘Come, sleep now, why are you awake?’ his wife was asking. ‘I’m looking at you, I never tire of looking at you,’ Abbas replied with a smile.

“You have forgotten all your promises, how peacefully you have gone off to sleep near the water. O, Abul Fazl Abbas, how will I spend this long and difficult life alone? O my moon of the Quraish, this darkness in my spirit is suffocating me.”

Ali Akbar was the Prophet’s look-alike. He resembled him so much that when the companions of the Prophet missed his presence acutely they would look at the boy and satisfy their longing. He had the same radiant face, wide forehead, broad shoulders and lofty stature. He was only eighteen, but the thoughtful and serious expression on his face belied his age. In his conversation, he was knowledgeable and refined, and was resolute, mature and restrained in his speech. But, at the same time, he was soft-spoken and gentle. Anyone who met him for the first

time developed immense regard for him. His education was so thorough that despite his age he could endlessly exchange ideas with reputable scholars and participate in debates without any reserve. His virtuousness and piety were exemplary.

Whatever spare time he had from studying he spent in learning the art of swordsmanship and riding, and in military training. He had innumerable friends. He knew the Qur'an so well that he could easily correct mistakes in recitation.

Once, in Yazid's court, people were having a conversation on who most deserved to be called a complete human being, and someone said, "Ali Akbar Ibn Husain."

"But he is just a boy."

"Even then, he is capable of putting the best statesmen to shame."

Yazid had sent for him, spoken with him at length and was extremely impressed. He had said, "The country needs learned people like you. Come to Syria, take whatever position you desire, you will have complete authority and control."

Yazid had had a special reason for making this request. If he was able to separate such a "dangerous" person from Husain then he would be successful in creating a huge rift among his supporters. But Ali Akbar had diplomatically sidestepped the issue.

"I still need to be under my parents' supervision, I have much to learn."

The Imam was especially attached to him. And his brothers and sisters also loved him dearly. Sakina and Sughra would sometimes fight over their brother.

"Why, you already have Chacha Abbas and now you have your eyes on Bhaiya, too," Sakina would say.

Fatima Sughra would lose her temper, "Yes, Chacha Jaan is mine and Bhaiya is mine, too."

Sakina would sulk.

"Well, Bhaiya is neither yours nor ours, he is Phupi Jaan's," Fatima Kubra would tease her two younger sisters.

It was indeed true that Ali Akbar was his Phupi Zainab's favourite child. She had raised him as her own. If he even complained of the slightest headache, she would create a big fuss. To Ali Akbar, she was no less than his own mother. Zainab had not had any children when Ali Akbar was born, but she was filled with such overwhelming maternal love that she picked up the baby from her sister-in-law's lap and from that day on she had cared for him as if he was hers. She kept him with her all the time, handing him over to his mother only when he had to be nursed.

"I am just his wet-nurse, it is Zainab Bibi who is his mother," Bano would say good-naturedly.

He slept with Zainab, she washed and bathed him, stitched new clothes for him, combed his hair, applied kohl in his eyes. She would kiss his beautiful tiny hands and say to Bano, "No, Bhabi, I am just his caregiver, you are his mother. You have such a large heart to have given him to me."

Ali Akbar was like a doll, a plaything for Zainab. She showered her love and maternal feelings on him. His early education also took place under her tutelage. She had such hopes for his marriage and she had not been able to find a girl who she thought was good enough to be her daughter-in-law. For hours on end, she would talk joyously about his wedding.

After the martyrdom of Abbas Ibn Ali, the only person who stood in the way of Imam Husain's death was Ali Akbar. Seeing his father's condition, Ali Akbar could not

muster the courage to ask for leave to meet his death in the battlefield.

The Imam was sitting in his tent with his head lowered. One by one, his friends, companions and members of his own beloved family had left since early morning. Slowly, the tent had emptied out. All that was left behind were some reminders of those who had now departed.

Even the slightest sound of footsteps made him tremble, for he was afraid it might be Ali Akbar coming to seek his permission to go into battle. He was well aware of what was going to happen, but for a father, every single moment of his son's life is precious, every moment that passes is for his son.

Everyone has to go, but how does one send someone whom one has raised with such great love and care for eighteen years to a pack of beasts who will attack him with spears and arrows? Death would be a far easier alternative than suffering the pain of losing a grown son. These merciless tyrants do not care about the tragedy they are inflicting upon the heart of a hapless father. Are they all childless? Has no one among them sat his child upon his knee, felt a sense of pride in seeing his own reflection in his son's form?

"No, no this cannot be. I will not give Ali Akbar permission to die. I do not have strength any longer to suffer another tragedy." The Imam was talking to himself when he suddenly heard a voice from the Beyond.

Husain, you have to witness more suffering. It is easy to die. Those destined to watch their children being slaughtered without accepting defeat are God's chosen ones, the torchbearers that illuminate the path of righteousness. There are many more trials to come, you have to fulfill your responsibility.

When Ali Akbar stepped inside the tent, feeling somewhat vulnerable, his head lowered, the Imam's gaze first fell on his feet. How small these feet are, unsteady, tottering, just like the time when he was learning to walk.

Holding his breath he watches the little boy's first steps. The Imam's heart matches every step the boy takes, as if it is he, not his son, who is taking his first steps toward a life filled with action. A person immerses himself into his offspring's existence, forgetting his own. Her arms spread, her heart racing, Bano walks alongside her son so that she can catch him if he stumbles. Ali Akbar's steps falter many times and Bano leaps forward agitatedly, but the Imam gestures to her to stop. The child's sense of accomplishment at his first steps should not be taken away from him. And when Ali Akbar takes his first few steps, it seems as if he has conquered the seven worlds. All day, joy blossoms in the Imam's heart like a flower.

Today, he is coming to seek permission to stride towards his death. The Imam answered Ali Akbar's question before he could ask. "Abbas's death has completely shattered me. After I am gone there should be someone left to take care of these tormented souls. I have decided that I will go into the battlefield now. I am hopeful that the enemy will spare you after I am dead."

"Baba Jaan, I will not be able to bear this injustice. It was my turn to go to the battlefield before Chacha Abbas, but because he went to get water I remained silent. That you leave to fight while I am still alive is out of the question. May God take away a son's sight before his father is martyred in front of his eyes."

"Ali, my ageing heart will collapse...take pity on me..."

"Baba, I will not be able to face the world. Jafar, Osman, Muhammad, Qasim, Aun—those who were younger than me—have attained martyrdom and I should live, to be tied up in ropes and dragged through the streets with women and children, taken to Yazid's court and be insulted and debased—would you be able to tolerate this? I am neither ill nor a baby like Ali Asghar. No matter what anyone says, I do not deserve such humiliation."

His eyes closed, his head lowered, the Imam remained silent for a while.

Sometimes love compels parents to say the most inappropriate things. "You are right. Martyrdom is far better than the life you will spend in captivity. I cannot take away your right to jihad. But go and get permission from your mother first. A mother's right over her son is greater than that of a father's."

After Ali Akbar left, the Imam smiled. This was the first time his son had disobeyed his father, the first time he had been obstinate, and that too not to save his life, but to sacrifice it.

"Ammi Jaan, this is not fair," Ali Akbar complained as he sat down at his mother's feet.

"What is it my beloved child?" Bano asked apprehensively. Ever since he was little he had gone to his aunt, Zainab with his complaints. How had he thought of coming to his mother today? A thousand fears took root in her heart.

"Baba says that I must live as a prisoner of the tyrants, I will be dragged into the streets with manacles around my neck."

"God Forbid, my child, this is no time to jest. Your father has never infringed on anyone's rights, why would he say

something like this to his own son? Never have I heard him utter an unjust or unfair word in all his life."

"It is my misfortune that today he wants to deprive me of my right. Ammi, please intervene on my behalf?"

"Intervene?" Bano said anxiously. A request for an intercession and too with the Imam?

"Please ask him to grant me permission to go to battle."

Ali Akbar said this as if he was asking for permission to go to a carnival.

Bano clutched her bosom. Ali Akbar looked at her from the corner of his eyes. True, his aunt had raised him since he was a baby, but his mother adored him.

"Qasim has gone, Aun and Muhammad have departed, and worst of all, Chacha Abbas has left us. Now Baba says I cannot go, he insists he will go himself."

"Dear God!"

Bano stared at her son's face. She felt as if someone had struck a blow to her jugular with a sword. The blood oozed. On the one hand was her husband, on the other, the pride of her motherhood.

Whom shall she destroy first? This was the question she was being asked.

At that moment the Imam came inside in the tent.

"Please reason with him, the young man will not listen to me. All this trouble is because of me. My blood will appease the enemy. The lives of all those who remain will be spared. You love Ali Akbar so much, just take him and go to a safe place. You have longed to find him a wife. Go, and then think about me as well, my spirit will share in your happiness."

Stunned and shocked, Bano stared at both father and son. What had the two decided to do today? The Imam was saying, "May God grant you the opportunity to bring

home Ali Akbar's bride. Think of me when you play with your grandson and granddaughter. When as a baby Ali Akbar's son comes crawling to my grave I will be yearning to kiss him. Come, take God's name and give me leave Bano, because those thirsting for my blood will not wait much longer. According to military etiquette, there is a break after every encounter, but these men are not soldiers they are butchers, they answer to no decree of humanity."

Not only had Bano never made any significant decisions in her life, she had not even been involved in making any minor decisions. She had entrusted her heart and her life to the Imam. She was his, so he was responsible for everything good and bad in her life. But at this moment, suddenly, her dormant powers of decision-making came to life. She said, "I have never asked you for anything for myself. I have you, so what else can I need? Today, I ask you to give my son his right of jihad."

The Imam stared at her, speechless.

"What are you thinking, my master? Take God's name and give him leave. If you live then my hopes and dreams remain alive. I will get my son married, bring home a beautiful young bride, you and I both will live to see the beautiful face of our grandson. Without you, there will be no wedding, no marriage. Bano will not live without her lord and master. And it is a grown-up son's duty to sacrifice his life for his father, shed his own blood instead of allowing his father to suffer. Ali Akbar has been pleading with me for a long time, please do not disappoint him. We were not in a position to give him things he may have desired as a child or a young man, nor did he ever ask for anything. Today, he desires to achieve triumph by giving up his life for his Imam. He has the right to do so, please give him his right."

"Ah yes, you are the mother after all, you will support your son." But in his heart, the Imam acknowledged with pride his life partner's courage. How brave and dignified an ordinary, weak woman can be when faced with a daunting test.

"Then do not hesitate. Please give your son what he is asking for."

"Go, Ali Akbar, I give you leave," said the Imam drawing a heavy breath.

"Ammi, I pray that you live long," said Ali Akbar, mad with joy, as he kissed his mother's feet.

A bitter smile spread across Bano's lips. *Ah, dear boy, you go to the battlefield to be killed with the prayer that your old mother should suffer through the punishment of living a long life?* She controlled her feelings and said, "Go, my precious one, show them the power of the Prophet's legacy that is surging through your veins. Go make me proud, my beloved son, today I release you from any obligations you may owe me."

Then she lost all restraint as motherly emotions overpowered the strong-willed and courageous woman. She said tearfully, "You will come back safe and sound, won't you? You will return to show me your beautiful face? Ali Akbar, you are leaving, but promise me that you will come back alive and well, my beloved child. If you don't, this mother's heart will break, I will not have the strength to see your body. Oh God, let me go blind before that happens."

Bano began sobbing uncontrollably. But Ali Akbar was in a hurry. As he was leaving, the Imam said, "You have won your case with both of us, Ali Akbar, but now you have to accomplish your most difficult task. You have to seek permission from your ill-fated, grief-stricken aunt. She is the one who has the most right over you. But talk to her gently, Zainab's wounds are still raw."

"Yes, Baba, she is the one I worry about the most." Ali Akbar lifted the screen at the entrance of the tent and left quickly. Bano felt life leaving her body. The Imam gently placed his hand over his disconsolate wife's shoulder.

"Brave mother of a brave son, you are about to receive the rewards of eighteen years of hard work. Ali Akbar is not just fighting for our cause, he is going to fight on behalf of all humanity. Today, he will prove that no matter how lonely the truth is, it is never meaningless or trivial. Ali Akbar is the standard bearer for all young men, future generations will fight tyranny and injustice in the world in his name. May God forgive me, but today I am filled with pride that I am Ali Akbar's father."

But Bano had fainted in the Imam's arms.

He who was once like a toy that amuses and entertains, was on his way to play a grand role in the most gruesome game of fate. After the martyrdom of her innocent sons, Zainab's gaze travelled repeatedly to Ali Akbar's face. She knew that any time now he too was going to receive his summons. She sat nervously in her tent on the very spot where, a short while ago, the bodies of her slain children had rested. When Ali Akbar entered the tent she feigned indifference. She was well aware that he had come to take leave from her. She turned away, as if she could forestall death with these ploys. After all, every moment is precious. Hope cannot die as long as there is breath in one's body.

Ali Akbar did not say anything. He came closer, kneeled and placed his head in his aunt's lap. As a child, he would come to her when he was exhausted after playing, and

would quietly fall asleep with his head in her lap. Her loving reprimand would echo in his ears like a sweet lullaby. Today, he had not come to sleep in her lap.

Her first impulse was to hold on tightly to her nephew and sob hysterically until she had vented all her feelings and then say, *'My beloved son, let us run away, far from this hell, to some beautiful lush green valley where there would be a small cottage where I would welcome a bride as beautiful as the moon for you. The house would be filled with little blossoms, and that is how a paradise would be created for this sad, sorrowful Zainab.'*

Then she remembered that these thoughts are just a mother's pleasant dreams, the daughter of the Lion of God cannot even think of such things. What the Imam has decided must now be Zainab's conviction, too. The path that the grandson of the Prophet of God and son of Ali Ibn Abi Talib has chosen to walk on, is the path that Zainab will walk on as well. She was proud of the fact that she was the sister of a brother who was fighting against cruelty and injustice. She pretended to be angry and said, "I do not care for all this outward show of love. I say, what am I to you? I didn't even carry you in my womb for nine months, but kept you clasped to my bosom from the moment you were born. I stayed awake at nights, you slept in my lap and that was enough to give me happiness. And when you first started teething and were in pain, I shed a thousand tears for every tear that you shed."

"How fortunate am I that Allah has blessed me with two mothers," said Ali Akbar with a smile, holding back his tears. "It was in this lap that I was showered with the world's most sacred blessings. I memorised the ayats of the Qur'an, I received my first lessons of knowledge and wisdom here. Now I come to beg leave from this loving abode, so that I

can take a test based on all that I have learned, and pass it successfully. It is my misfortune that I will not be able to serve you, who is both my mother and my aunt. Phupi Amma, everything in this world has a price, but there can be no price placed upon a mother's love."

"You are a grown man now, you have become an exemplary human being. I have received my reward. Fortunate is the woman who has the privilege of raising a son like you. By God, loving you has enriched my life with real joy."

Finally, as Ali Akbar was leaving, she said, "My son, will you go in these shabby clothes? Where is your mother? Tell her to come and dress you properly."

When Bano arrived, Zainab gave her the wedding garments she had brought for Ali Akbar.

"Here, Bano, dress him in these clothes."

"Sister, you do it with your own hands."

"No, Bano, my hands are already stained with the blood of my sons."

"The blood of those brave ones are a blessing."

"But I am afraid it might be an ill omen."

"Well, I will wear them only if you help me to put them on. Otherwise, I will leave in these shabby clothes," Ali Akbar insisted stubbornly.

His mother and aunt helped him put on the regal garments. No sooner had the news of his going into battle spread than everyone came rushing to see him, surrounding him from everywhere. It was as if Ali Akbar was actually getting ready to be a bridegroom. The Imam decked him with all the weapons, placed the turban on his head, and tied Amirul Momineen's leather belt tightly around his waist. Ali Akbar embraced everyone, then he hugged the children. Sakina came and clung to his ankles.

"Bhai, you are not going to get water, are you? In God's name, don't go. The river is very cruel, anyone who goes near it, does not return. Chacha Jaan went and stayed there, he forgot all about me."

When the Imam made a move to bolster Ali Akbar's leg as he was about to get on his horse, Uqaab, the young man hesitated and stepped back.

"I cannot be audacious enough to place my foot on your blessed hand."

"At this moment, I am not the Imam, only your father. When you were a child, I used to kiss these feet, touch them to my eyes. When you climbed onto my chest with your tiny feet I felt as if I was the greatest man alive. I order you to use my hands as a support and mount your horse."

First, Ali Akbar bent down and kissed the Imam's feet. Then the Imam joined his palms together and propping Ali Akbar's foot, helped him up on the horse. After this, holding the reins the Imam escorted him for a short distance.

"Being your escort is a matter of great pride for me. You will supersede me in achieving the honour of martyrdom."

Ali Akbar advanced towards the battlefield. The Imam lifted his hands, "O, Almighty, you are my witness, I sacrifice the boy who was your Prophet's very image in your cause. When I missed Rasulullah, I used to gaze upon the face of this child."

There was speculation among the enemy troops: "All the brothers and nephews have been killed. Who will come to fight us now?"

How many brave fighters had perished since the morning. By now, people's conscience was dulled, their hearts were filled with poison, their feelings and emotions were dead. Yet, the name of the Prophet of God still struck fear into their hearts. Banishing that name from their hearts was impossible in such short a time. Fear and dread had slowly spread among the soldiers. After every murder, their sense of defeat had increased. Sometimes they would tremble at the thought of what was to come in the afterlife. But an overpowering fear of death crushes every other emotion. The ability to think and comprehend is paralysed.

Carrying his young and handsome rider, the Arabian steed, Uqaab, cantered elegantly with poise, proud of his rider's boyish charm. His long neck was arched distinctly, his mane swinging delicately, as if he was taking his master to his cherished beloved's abode instead of the battlefield.

Ali Akbar's mother, Umme Laila, was the maternal granddaughter of Abu Sufiyan and Yazid's paternal aunt's daughter. So the people of Syria had brought a letter of amnesty for Ali Akbar. But he had torn it to pieces, tossed it in the air and said, "This letter of amnesty is not for me, it is for the relationship that exists between your king and my mother. I consider this relationship my misfortune and break all my ties with you."

Ali Akbar began the *rajz*: "People say that I resemble the Prophet. I am merely an insignificant ray from the sun that ripped the curtain of darkness and ignorance and showed humanity the way towards light and goodness. O you bigots, recognise me for who I am. I am Ali, the son of Imam Husain Ibn Ali, and today I have come here to prove that every last speck of dust at my Imam's feet will oppose

tyranny, despotism and injustice till the very end. No threat can frighten us, no greed for wealth and status can shake our resolve. You are offering me an opportunity to escape alive. Fools! First seek refuge from the wrath of my sword."

On hearing the mention of the Prophet's name, the troops immediately started sending blessings upon the Prophet and his family. Their heads were bent in submission, their eyes were lowered, and, in that moment, all ill feelings were erased and anger and misery faded away. Heaven and earth resounded with cries of "Hail, Haider", and lances were lowered in the name of Ali Ibn Abi Talib.

Shimr Ibn Ziljaushan saw the 'condition' the army was in and smiling sarcastically, he said to Ibn Sa'ad, "God help us, what special training have your troops received from you? Instead of taking enemy lives, they are ready to sacrifice their own."

"Excuse me, brother, this is not my army. This is an army of conscripted soldiers. Who knows from where these inexperienced and illiterate men were picked up? They don't understand orders properly, nor are they qualified to carry them out. And actually, it's not their fault. They were told that we are going to defeat the enemies of Islam. They hear a few words, lack any kind of foresight or experience, their faith is weak, and they believe in anything they are told."

"You don't understand our commander's strategy. Soldiers have been recruited from nearly every town and city so that there is little chance of forming groups and alliances. Don't you see the differences that exist among them? And moreover, they do not have any attachment to the citizens of Mecca and Medina. Do you think virtuous, upright and scholarly men should have been sent here, who would have wiped us out instead of destroying the enemy? These men

are half-human fools. The strategy our opponents are using against them is to jolt them until their conscience awakens, like ripples on the surface of water when a stone is thrown in. Real soldiering is about keeping these ripples in check. This battle is not one that just anyone can fight. It's one thing to control forces from one particular region, but, as you say, controlling this conscripted army is a difficult task."

Shimr Ibn Ziljaushan was always looking for an opportunity to trick Ibn Sa'ad. He enjoyed provoking him and it gave him great pleasure to keep proving to him that he was inept. He had been appointed to keep an eye on Sa'ad. One word from him, and his entire family could be wiped out. The poor man felt tormented.

Shimr Ibn Ziljaushan had created his own formidable division which he deployed in ingenious ways. He had shrewdly enlisted strong fighters who had been selected after many tests. They came from tribes that had been crushed mercilessly, their cultural and social ties had been annihilated, and they were half-mad with anger and hatred. Only devastation and bloodshed gave them pleasure. They were favoured with the choicest of gifts and received special rations and alcohol. It was a powerful force that had been readied over the last twenty years in order to suppress the masses. Every time they emerged victorious in combat, they were rewarded with cash and profitable legal contracts. They were foolish enough to think that they were better and more distinguished than ordinary soldiers, and were convinced that they were the true protectors and guardians of Islam.

Their mission was to keep an eye on those who displayed even the slightest bit of negligence and mete out the worst possible punishments to them. In order to create fear among

the people, a few men would be killed so mercilessly and cruelly on false charges of insubordination and sedition that witnesses would become terrified and lose their minds. And this special force did not carry out these atrocities themselves. Their strategy was to force other battalions to do their dirty work for them. These unsuspecting men, in turn, did their bidding and then beat a hasty retreat. Instead of being reprimanded for such acts they were commended and sent back to the safety of their army lines where they were showered with money and other gifts, and granted a special status that filled them with a sense of superiority. Before long, they would start dreaming of becoming part of the special force.

The luxuries of this world are far more attractive than the promises of the next world and this is what appeals the most to an ignorant man. After witnessing so much killing, an ordinary soldier develops a strange kind of callousness and effrontery, and instead of helping his companions he worries only about saving his own life. The Imam's companions had come into battle with no fear of losing their lives. At the same time, physically and mentally they were far superior to this riff raff in the enemy lines. This was the reason that even a boy from among their ranks was easily able to eliminate line after line of these soldiers.

"Is there anyone among you worthy of his mother's milk, who has the courage to come and fight me?" Ali Akbar challenged.

One or two came forward to show off their muster but were popped like a bubble of water. They came roaring and thundering but were split open like hollow drums.

Shimr said to Ibn Sa'ad, "We can't play the game without making some bold moves. The sun has started to go down,

if we continue with this one-on-one combat, we will go on like this until nightfall."

"What a handsome young man he is, the wretch!" Ibn Sa'ad began to sweat. He wasn't listening.

"Well, after this Husain will break."

"What expertise the tormenter has! Is that a sword in his hand or is it an illusion? One can't keep one's eyes on it," he continued, mesmerised.

"All right, you can praise him later, why don't you give your orders first."

"What orders should I give?"

"That he should be immediately surrounded."

"It's difficult to hold him with one's gaze." Ibn Sa'ad was talking to himself.

Shimr became livid.

"Are you planning to follow in Hurr's footsteps?"

Ibn Sa'ad gave Shimr a startled look, took in the majesty of his special force, and issued orders that Ali Akbar be attacked from all sides.

Ali Akbar was ready for this four-way attack. He had seen many being killed in this way since morning. He had also received special military training wherein he had learnt many maneuvers to protect oneself especially when cowards break all the rules and strike when one is alone. Having become an expert in this exclusive technique of combat, he had passed on these skills to others. He was using specific techniques to ensure that the soldiers would pursue him and when they came charging towards him at full speed, he would swiftly and expertly dodge the cavalry and swerve to one side. The men would charge on ahead and he would turn around, attack them from the rear and crush them.

Ever since he could remember there was not one day when Ali Akbar had not held a sword in his hand. He had been made aware that a moment such as this would come and his childhood and youth were spent in preparing for this blessed day. When others were playing in the streets and creating a commotion, the children of the Imam's family were busy practicing their lessons. At an age when young men are attracted to the opposite sex, Ali Akbar was lost in thoughts about defeating death. How then could ten or twenty soldiers stand up to the onslaught of one such as him?

His stallion had also been raised along with him. They shared a brotherly bond of love and friendship. When Ali Akbar mounted him, the stallion became one with his master and could anticipate his every move. On the other hand, the enemy combatants' horses had either been bought without any thought or had been acquired during looting, and the animals were as confused and bewildered as their riders. They senselessly galloped off this way and that, endangering the life of their riders who toppled and fell on their face, and then they bolted away, trampling them under their hooves.

Thirst, however, took its toll and Ali Akbar turned his steed around and hurriedly riding toward the Imam, thanked him for his praise. Then he said, "I'm very thirsty, Baba."

"I know my son, but your Baba is helpless." The Imam wept as he embraced his son. Cupping Ali Akbar's face with his hands, he kissed it fervently, kissed his forehead, his enflamed eyes and parched lips. As a child if Bano was busy and Ali Akbar became impatient with hunger and started crying, the Imam would touch the tip of his tongue to the little one's lips to pacify him. At this moment,

too, driven by the same thought, he placed the tip of his tongue to his lips.

"Oh, Baba, there are thorns on your tongue," Ali Akbar said laughing. "But my thirst is quenched."

The Imam took off the Prophet's sacred ring from his finger and put it into Ali Akbar's mouth. "The beneficence of this ring will quench your thirst."

Ali Akbar's eyes welled with tears of joy as he felt the effects of the blessed ring. The minute the ring of the Keeper of the Spring of Kausar was in his mouth, his thirst vanished, his spirits were revived, and colour in his face was restored. He returned to the battlefield and wreaked havoc with such vigour that line after line of the enemy's troops was vanquished.

Ali Akbar's stallion had realised the importance of this battle. He too was challenging the enemy's mounts. The horses would retreat the moment they saw him, would resist orders, rise up on their hind legs and start kicking in the air. As for Uqaab, if any one came in his way he would charge with such ferocity that the beast as well the rider would be crushed to a pulp under his hooves. Like their faint-hearted riders, the horses, too, were making overly impetuous moves and Ali Akbar's stallion was pushing forward responding in kind.

By now both Ali Akbar and his horse were drenched in blood. Ali Akbar was losing strength as he had lost a lot of blood. Again and again he saw a dark shadow appear before his eyes, the sword seemed to be slipping from his hand.

There was nothing left to do now but to overpower Ali Akbar using some kind of ploy. The Arab nation adheres to strict codes of conduct. Such attacks are against the

values of courage and manliness. But at this moment these soldiers were not a part of any nation, they had turned into wild beasts. Ibn Sa'ad ordered a division to move away and ambush the Imam's tents.

Unaware of this development, Ali Akbar waited for the enemy to employ its final, most ignominious scheme. The few slaves that were left in their camp and the Imam no longer had the strength to withstand an attack. This battle was for the Imam, so as long as Ali Akbar was alive no one could harm a hair on the Imam's head.

The enemy's cowardly scheme worked. Ali Akbar turned to forestall the men moving to attack the tents and was surrounded from the front as well as the rear.

A fierce storm ensued with swords, spears and lances and soon Muhammad's look-alike was covered in dust and blood.

Imam Husain felt life ebb from him as he saw Ali Akbar's steed returning towards the tents without the rider. Dizzy and trembling, he sank to the floor. Then he got up and shouting Ali Akbar's name came out running towards the battlefield. Unsteady from thirst and weakness, he staggered and fell repeatedly. It was difficult for him to pull himself up again, but shaking with apprehension, he got up on his feet.

"Ali Akbar, where are you my son..."

One day, as a child, Ali Akbar had suddenly disappeared. A thorough search was conducted, men were sent out to scout the streets, Abbas went to the mosque looking for him. But there was no sign of him. The tyrants were always

looking for ways to create trouble and that was why everyone was always on the edge. They feared that Ali Akbar had been kidnapped. There was a huge bounty on the heads of the members of the Imam's family.

Hearing the commotion, the Imam emerged from his room.

"Who is lost?" he asked a weeping Bano.

"My beloved son, Ali Akbar."

"He must be playing around here somewhere."

"He is nowhere, we have looked everywhere. My heart is sinking with fear and anxiety..."

That was when the Imam went out himself to look for his son.

"Ali Akbar, where are you, son?"

Ali Akbar emerged from under his aunt Zainab's blanket and wrapped himself around his father's legs. Zainab, who was fast asleep, was not aware of any of this.

But today, Ali Akbar was not hiding under her blanket because she was leaning against the entrance to the tent, trembling, her head uncovered.

Staggering, the Imam kept going.

"I cannot take another step, I need support my son, hold my hands, take pity on your old father... All right, if you won't lend me support then at least call out once so that I get some relief. My breath is filled with sand, my chest is about to explode, I cannot breathe, do not even think of abandoning me in my old age... I will be neither dead nor alive..."

The cowards beat their chests when they saw the Imam approaching. They lamented and, falling upon each other each other with their swords, they dispersed. The unarmed Imam tore through the crowd to get to his son. Covered in sand and drenched in blood, Ali Akbar was convulsing, on

the verge of death. There was fresh blood spurting from the wound in his chest.

Sensing his father's presence, he opened his eyes. Quickly, he placed a hand on his chest to hide the spearhead lodged in it because he knew Baba would not have the strength to see it.

"You are hiding your wounds from me, Ali Akbar... every wound and stab you have is cutting into the inner depths of my soul..."

The Imam gathered his son in his arms and held him close. Soon, he was bathed in his son's youthful blood.

"Baba, I am not thirsty any more...even the sand no longer burns like fire. Has the sun set?" Ali Akbar stared around him, as if he was looking for someone, as if someone had come to take him.

The Imam saw that Ali Akbar's hands and feet were beginning to stiffen.

"Please tell Sughra I am sorry, I could not fulfill my promise. I did not get a chance to give her a wedding gift..."

The son closed his eyes. The father felt his own life ebb from his body. For a few moments he sat still, in shock, staring at Ali Akbar's peaceful, smiling face. Then he held his face against his son's and said, "You too have abandoned me, Ali Akbar. Who will give shoulder to my coffin, who will lower me into my grave... will there be no one left to carry my body from the battlefield. This is not right. This was my time to die, you were meant to enjoy the joys of life and living, there was much you still had to do. Alas, what did I give you? Sorrows, fears, insults and humiliation as your inheritance. Sajjad is ill, not only can I not give him any medicine I cannot even moisten his throat with a few drops of water. Ali Asghar is not going to live long either.

My existence and my name will be forgotten, no one will remember me. How can I go back to the tents, Ali Akbar, what will I say to your mother?"

The Imam had carried everyone's body back to the camp himself, but now when he stooped to pick up Ali Akbar he felt as if he had no more energy left in him. It was as if he had suddenly become older by centuries. Innumerable wrinkles had appeared on his face, his hair had turned white, his back was bent.

With the help of his slaves the Imam carried the body of his young son to the camp. Everyone was swooning, no one had any strength left to cry and lament.

The Withered Flower

Bano's Ali Asghar, who is still nursing, has been thirsty since the seventh of Muharram. She keeps feeling his pulse frantically. Her milk has dried up. There is not a single drop of water available. There is no hope in sight for the baby's survival. She paces about restlessly, then bends over to check on the baby again, clutches her bosom and helplessly rubs her hands together.

Abul Fazl Abbas had tried to dig a well at two different spots. Everyone, young and old, pitched in till their hands were bleeding, but the family of the Prophet was not destined to have water. Now even the tears dry up before they can flow from the eyes.

Bano stares at everyone but no one has the courage to look her in the eye. Again and again, she lifts her hands in prayer.

"O, Keeper of the Spring of Kausar, my baby is dying of thirst. O God, what shall I do, where shall I go? Allah, my heart does not have the strength to endure any more ordeals. The grief of my young Ali Akbar's death is already making my heart bleed. There is no place left in my heart to suffer a fresh wound, it is shattered. O, Preserver of the World, have mercy on this little one. O sister, Zainab, my dear sister, do you see how listless he is ... he does not cry or whimper. He opened his eyes in the afternoon but since then he has been unconscious. Ahhh, my child's earlobes have curled up, his breathing is uneven, the light of my eyes is about to be extinguished."

"Please try to calm yourself Bano, my princess," Zainab tries to pacify her sister-in-law.

"What can I do, I feel as if someone is squeezing my heart. Allah, what special plans we had! I had thought I would take him to Najaf, make him an attendant of Shah-e-Najaf's shrine. By God's grace he would have been walking by then, I would hold his finger and walk around the grave. But now he is preparing to go to his own grave. O my Master, neither has the blessed vow of taking off the amulets been fulfilled nor have I had the chance to celebrate a bismillah for his first lessons, and he has already been summoned. If you had to leave so soon, why did you ever grace my lap? My beloved son, take pity on your ill-fated mother, open your eyes just once."

Ever since Zainab Bint Ali set eyes on the blood-soaked body of Ali Akbar she had been lost in some strange world of sorrow and anguish. And right in front of her eyes the last lamp to light her brother's life was also engulfed in the storm of death. Even though every corner of the earth is filled with water, springs are overflowing, cataracts are humming, lakes are brimming, a six-month-old helpless baby has been suffering the anguish of thirst for three days. The child's fingers were stiff, his small hands could no longer curl to form fists, he'd put his thumb in his mouth but had lost the strength to suck.

Zainab had no words of comfort left for her sister-in-law. How can someone whose patience and tranquility have been completely shattered give another a lesson in forbearance?

"This is our fate, Bano."

"Look, his pupils are turning up..." Sometimes Bano kissed his tiny hands and feet, at other times she either fanned him with the hem of her shirt, or stared vacantly at people's faces.

Sakina, forgetting her own thirst, came to her brother. "My baby brother doesn't even laugh!" she said, clapping her hands in front of his face. "Open your eyes, my prince, why don't you speak? Are you angry with me? Look how worried Ammi is because of you. Allah, why don't you look at me? Are you thirsty, my precious one? I am going to give my brother a lot of water... Ammi Jaan, what is happening to my brother?"

Hearing Sakina's laments, everyone gathered around the cradle. One person adjusted the baby's drooping head on the pillow, another straightened his stiff feet. Everyone was reading *ayaats* from the Qur'an and blowing blessings over him.

The blood from his older son's body was not yet dry on the Imam's hands, and already baby Ali Asghar had started his journey towards death. He stumbled towards his baby. Zainab leapt forward to hold her brother. Taking him by the hand, she brought him to the cradle, showed him the tiny stiff hands and feet. The Imam realised that Ali Asghar was about to depart from this world. His breathing was extremely irregular.

For a while, he stared achingly at his innocent son. Suddenly, he lowered his head and whispered something in his son's ear.

For a moment, the child triumphed over the struggle between life and death. With great effort he opened his eyes and smilingly stretched his hands towards the Imam so he would pick him up. The Imam held the baby close to his tired, defeated bosom and closed his eyes.

Sakina began to clap joyfully. "Ah ha, Baba made my little brother smile. Ammi Jaan, he smiled and opened his eyes and eagerly went into Baba's arms."

Bano sighed with relief and wiping her tears, broke into a laugh. "I'm so apprehensive, Allah, I thank you a thousand times. Do you see Zainab Bibi, how he was smiling when he was in his father's arms? As if he's the only one who matters, while I, the unlucky one, am nobody."

Seeing her laugh, everyone joined in.

Zainab could not hold back her smile. Then she leaned over and kissed her nephew's forehead and asked the Imam, "Bhai, what did you whisper in your son's ear to make him come back to life?"

"Nothing, Zainab, I just asked him, 'Will you go to see Ali Akbar, son?' He is very attached to him. The excitement of seeing his older brother made him break into a smile and he came into my lap in the hope that I would take him to Ali Akbar."

Bano said, "Perhaps the tyrants will soften, seeing his tender age, and give him some water to drink."

"I will take him and for his sake I will beg for water, but that is all I can do. The rest depends on what fate has in store and whether they give him water or death."

Hearing the word 'death', Bano quaked. She said, "I do not wish for such water. Here, give me back my son, my lord."

"You are doing everything to save him from death. If he dies while he is in your care, what will you do?"

Bano's outstretched hands fell helplessly, and hanging her head, she burst into tears.

"Bano, forget for a moment that Ali Asghar is a baby and think, is he not a soldier, too? The only difference is that the enemy has big spears, tall lances, arrows dipped in poison, and heavy maces, while his tiny hands are empty. His only weapon is his innocence. We are all fighting in our own way,

he too is holding his position in this battle with such grace. Today, the restriction on age for jihad has been removed. Let this young soldier also go into the battlefield and prove his mettle. Who knows, maybe where our weapons have failed, his innocence and tender years will be victorious. I do not want to give the tyrants any opportunity to make excuses. If Ali Asghar breathes his last because of thirst here in his cradle, the enemy can claim that they did not know, that if they had seen him dying with their own eyes they would have given him water. They can say the Imam stubbornly held onto his position and killed his own child by denying him water so that he could blame us for being heartless, he did not tell us. For this reason, I want to take him. Also, they, too, are human beings, the followers of my grandfather, the Prophet of God. How can I believe that they have lost the ability to feel compassion for a thirsty child? It is also possible that if he gets water now he might die before it goes down his throat. Death is inevitable, whether it comes in this cradle or in the battlefield. What difference does it make? But you should do as you wish, you are his mother."

"Take him, my master, take my little soldier. But wait, let me change his clothes. I had made him a special pink shirt for his birthday, but we are no longer sure if he will live till then, no one knows whether he will have another year, it will be all right if he wears it now."

Bano dressed Ali Asghar in his new shirt. One cannot imagine what she must have been going through. She quickly combed his golden tresses, applied surma in his eyes, and then taking his cold, withered hand she touched it to his forehead and said, "People, our son says salaam ..."

Everyone present blessed him with benedictions for a long life, kissed away the evil eye and sent him off. The Imam

was about to step out when Bano ran and placed a blanket over Ali Asghar.

"My son's skin will wilt under the hot sun. Go, my beloved child, I free you from all debts that you owe me. O, Allah, will my son return alive to my lap or not? Please go carefully, my master, I will claim my child from you."

The Imam began walking with his son in his arms. Death walked alongside him with her arms outstretched.

The Imam was thinking, "Whenever I needed something I only had to ask God for it. How can I beg before these people for water? Where will I gather the courage to plead with them? I will not be able to speak, and even if I do, will they listen? Hope hangs by a fragile thread which will break soon and with that, my resolve will be destroyed as well."

As he walked towards the enemy lines, his self-respect suppressed his speech, courage forestalled his steps, his head was cast down.

All kinds of speculation arose when the enemy saw the Imam approaching.

Someone asked, "What is that in the Imam's hands?"

"It is the Qur'an. He wants to place the Qur'an between us and call for peace."

A wave of joy spread through the ranks.

"So he has finally come to his senses. Ali Akbar's death broke his back, all his pride is gone. We can sever his head and take that, but bringing the Imam back alive, in chains, is another thing altogether. When he arrives at Yazid's court with his shackles clanging, his pride will suffer a real blow and the truth behind all his grand claims will be revealed."

The Imam was unarmed. He didn't even have his sword in his belt. He was in a strange and terrible state. From head to toe he was drenched in the blood of his near and dear

ones. He had not had an opportunity to change his clothes, nor did he really wish to remove these stains from his body. These blood stains were the last reminders of his fortune, these stains had been bequeathed to him as a gift from those who had departed.

When he came closer, he removed the blanket from the baby's face. Lowering his gaze, he pleaded, "This child comes to you with an entreaty. He is faint from crying, he cannot manage even a whisper now. Everyone has been trying to pacify him, he is weak with thirst. According to you I am a criminal, I am a traitor, but this helpless child is innocent. This six-month-old child has been thirsty since the seventh of Muharram. His mother's milk has also dried up since last night. He has not even started crawling yet, he has not harmed you, nor can he. He cannot speak for himself, so for the first time in my life I am compelled to beg on his behalf."

Ibn Sa'ad said, "You know the terms well. You will not get water under any circumstances until you have agreed to our conditions."

"The conditions are for me, I am not asking for water for myself," the Imam said gently. "What does this child have to do with these conditions?"

"We don't have a single drop of water for any of your friends, companions or relatives. If Ali Asghar had crawled to us to beg for water, even then he would have been struck with swords and hit with arrows. Look, Sir, we are not stupid enough to be fooled by you. Ya Husain, it is you who is thirsty and you are using this child as an excuse to get water for yourself."

"Oh, so you think I am trying to trick you into giving me water? All right, I will place the child here on the sand in front of you and you can let a few drops of water trickle

down his throat so that his life is saved. You can demand whatever price you want for the water, I am ready to give it to you. If you ask for a pearl for each drop I will not refuse."

With his head lowered, the Imam spoke gently and with civility.

"Oh, we did not know you are in possession of Qarun's treasure and that you are ready to give a pearl for each drop of water. Your friends said you had no wealth."

"They were right. I do not possess any," the Imam replied.

"And if you had any wealth, you wouldn't be in this situation today, you would have a large army."

"One can buy donkeys like you with wealth, not friends, companions and sons. I have not come to do battle with you at this time, I have come to get some water for this child."

"And you are ready to give us a real pearl for every drop. Well, all right then, let us see the jewels and pearls you have in your pocket. We will consider your request after we have appraised them."

"I do not have jewels and pearls, but yes, there are some earrings in the children's ears that are used as amulets. If you wish, I can go and get them."

"Oh no, by God, that is our war bounty, you can't use that!"

"Have you lost your humanity? Are you nobody's son, are you barren or have never experienced the joy of holding a son to your bosom? Have you never lifted your child in your arms?"

Most of the soldiers lowered their heads in shame. Seeing an infant being treated this way made their hair stand on end.

"Giving him a little water will not reduce the amount of water in the river. A child, no matter what his parentage, is innocent," the soldiers muttered.

"An innocent child's forbearance will turn into God's wrath for us all, we will be finished. This is the extreme limit of cruelty."

Sensing the mood of his troops, Shimr started admonishing them. "You fools, are you mad? Do you want to ruin all that we have achieved so far? This child is innocent today. When he is a grown man he will destroy your tribes. Is that why you want to nurture a poisonous plant by watering it? Do you want to fall into a chasm of destruction, disgrace and shame for the sake of a mere child?" With that, Shimr signalled the men and a shower of arrows commenced.

The Imam held the child close to his chest and then stooping he tried to brace the onslaught of arrows with his body.

Suddenly, Hurmala Ibn Kahil strung a three-headed arrow on his bow and aimed it so perfectly that it pierced the baby's neck.

The infant screamed in pain and opened his eyes, as though he was asking his father, "O grandson of the Keeper of the Spring of Kausar, is this how the thirst of a helpless child is quenched?"

The Imam pulled out the arrow with trembling hands. Instead of milk, the child spat out fresh blood, a strange smile hovered on his lips for a moment and then he breathed his last. The Imam cupped his palms and collected the blood gushing from the little one's neck, and lifted his hands to throw it towards the sky when a voice came from the Beyond: *No, no, Husain, if you splash this blood towards the sky it will never rain again.*

When the Imam started to pour his son's blood onto the earth he heard the same voice: *Be warned, Husain, if even a*

drop of his blood falls on the earth, never again will a grain of wheat sprout from it.

The Imam cast a weary, helpless look all around him and said, "My son, Asghar, the earth and the sky are refusing your blood ... there is no place for your blood... I will not take away the earth's productivity ..." With that he smeared the blood on his face.

Holding his six-month-old son's martyred body in his lap Imam Husain Ibn Ali was saying to himself, "Ali Asghar, my beloved son, when your mother asks for you, what will I say? Where will I get the courage to place your body in her desolate lap?"

At this time, Fizza emerged from the tent.

The Imam called out to her, "So it is done, Fizza, Asghar's thirst has been quenched. Go and tell his mother that he has fallen into a very deep sleep and will awaken on the Day of Resurrection."

For a few moments he gazed with anguish at the wealth he had accumulated in his lifetime. Then suddenly, his face turned red with a surge of anger. His bent back straightened. He lifted his hands to the Heavens and cried out, "O God, are you watching..."

He did not have the heart to leave the body of such a tiny baby in the sun. He dug a small grave, buried Ali Asghar and, dusting off the edges of his shirt, he rose. Nothing was left now. Everything had been sacrificed. He walked back to see, for one last time, the relatives who were still alive.

The moment he stepped into the tent, there was a commotion: "The Imam has come to meet his relatives for the last time."

Everyone surrounded him and burst into tears. The Imam's face was pale and drawn from weakness, his feet

were cold, and his entire body quivered like an autumn leaf. He gazed around him with tired, weary eyes. He no longer had the strength to offer any words of consolation. He had only come to see them one final time. But he was unable to look anyone in the eye. His wife, Umme Laila, who had lost everything she had gained from eighteen years of hard work, her Ali Akbar; his wife, Umme Rubab, who had sacrificed her delicate, beautiful six-month-old baby; the tragic widow of Abul Fazl Abbas; his own daughter, Fatima Kubra, mourning for her husband, Qasim; and his brave and courageous sister, Zehra-e-Sani, who had suffered two losses, her sons, Aun and Muhammad. When Zainab Bint Ali saw her brother gazing dejectedly at everyone, she felt her heart breaking. She came forward and held his hand. The Imam placed his head despondently on his sister's shoulder.

"Zainab, Zainab, I am made of stone. Look how many assaults I have endured, but I am still alive. How much longer do I have to live?"

"May you live until the end of time, Bhai." Zainab held her brother to her bosom like a child.

"Look at my cloak, the blood of our dear ones has turned it into a garden of red roses. Look, this is Qasim's blood; this here is Abbas's; and when he embraced me as he was dying, Ali Akbar, too, bathed me in his blood. On my white hair is the red of Ali Asghar's blood, and as for both your precious ones, Aun and Muhammad, they drenched me in blood from head to toe."

The sister supported his tired head like a mother, sat him down beside her and ran her fingers through his hair. Her heart sank with pain when she saw his parched, bruised lips. He took her hands in his and helplessly placed them on his eyes.

"Every drop of this blood will have to be accounted for."

"Baba, dear Baba." Sakina stumbled in and clung to his legs. "Baba, I am not at all thirsty, I am sorry, I won't ask for water ever again. Chacha Jaan went to get water and never returned. Now I won't let you go for water."

"I am not going to bring water, my daughter; our share of water has been stolen from this earth. Now I will quench my thirst at the Spring of Kausar when I am with my mother."

"Then take me to Dadi Jaan as well, I too will drink a little water there."

"No, my girl, it is not your turn yet, you have to wait."

"I am tired of waiting, Baba, this is not a nice place. Let us go back to Medina."

"We cannot go to Medina, my precious."

"Then let us go to Najaf."

"The way to Najaf has also been closed to us. The enemy has placed road blocks everywhere."

"Baba, Zuljanah is faster than the wind, he will take us right through."

"Death is swifter than Zuljanah, it has been following us for years. We are surrounded from all sides, there is no way out. You are so wise, my doll, bid me goodbye with a smile. And look, you are my brave daughter, if something happens to me, do not cry because the enemy will be happy to see your tears."

"I won't cry, I will never shed tears to make the enemy happy."

"Take off these earrings and the necklace and throw them away. The greedy wretches will pull at your ears." The Imam had never hidden the truth from the children. "Times are about to get very bad."

"I still won't cry."

"Where is Bano?" asked the Imam, handing over his daughter to Zainab.

Fizza said, "Ever since she was separated from her son, she has not been in her senses. She is lying on the blood-spattered earth where her precious son's body had lain. One can't bear to see her in this condition, it drives one mad, rips one's heart out."

The Imam supported himself with his hands on his knees and hauled himself up. He went in and saw her lying face down on the blood-soaked sand, lost in the fearsome valleys of anguish and grief.

The Imam sat down beside her, placed her head in his lap, moved aside the strands of hair from her face and beseeched her, "Bano, won't you even bid me farewell? Your sorrow is my sorrow, my queen. Get up, I have very little time."

Startled, Bano opened her eyes. Seeing him she sat up and then placed her head at his feet.

"Where is my precious baby? You were supposed to bring him back to me. Give him to me, my precious child, where did you leave him? O dearest son of Fatima, have pity on me, bring me back my dear son. How will I live without him? The child I raised so lovingly, the support of my life, my moon, where is he hiding, what evil eye has devoured him? In the name of the Prophet of God, have mercy on this sorrowing woman...just let me have one glimpse of Muhammad's look-alike, then I can go blind forever. I want to hold him to my breast once, kiss his beautiful face, and then I will be ready to die."

Bano's anguished laments made the Imam's heart bleed. "Bano, my queen, how can I bring him back? How can I

placate someone who no longer speaks to us? He has gone to his grandmother. The good fortune of being able to love him for eighteen years is what we have to be grateful for. Think, my Bano, why did your lion-hearted son spill his hot young blood—for justice and truth, for the values that distinguish human beings from beasts. We are fortunate that the Almighty blessed us with such a matchless son. Bano, the magnificence with which Ali Akbar embraced death compelled the enemy to kneel before him. God forbid, had our son been like Yazid and lived to be a hundred, could we hold our heads high with pride?"

"No, no, my master, may God never give any mother the misfortune of giving birth to a devil. My martyred son is a thousand times more alive than those living corpses."

"My beloved, may God protect you, I am anxious to join my children. Come, if you have a message for your son, give it to me now."

The mention of his departure reopened all her wounds. She clutched her bosom and sat up. She was being separated from her life partner, widowhood was approaching, her marriage was about to go up in flames. This soft-spoken, mild-mannered man was going to make her life barren. The silken touch of these courageous hands was about to be drowned in blood, her reason for living was going to come to an end. With a sob she held the hem of his cloak and placing it onto her eyes, she said, "Bless you, O unrivalled son of Fatima. Only my heart knows how glorious the life I led with you was. You are going, what shall I do with my life now? What orders do you have for one so miserable as I? If your handmaiden is degraded and insulted as a prisoner of the tyrants, what will people say? Will the daughter-in-law

of Fatima Zehra and the Lion of God, the granddaughter-in-law of the Prophet of God be dragged through the streets and corners of Syria as a prisoner?"

"You are the daughter-in-law of this family and also the daughter. You will suffer in the same way as the other daughters of this family. Do you hope to receive preferential treatment?"

"No, my king, my fate is the same as that of the daughters of the Prophet's family. It is not an insult, but my good fortune. I am the mother of martyrs."

"And soon you will be the widow of a martyr. Wipe your tears, smile and say your farewells to the one who is leaving, so that the memory of the pleasant moments of life spent with you is revived. And remember, exercise restraint when you see my body. Weep for me in secret so the enemy does not feel gratified. Yes, when you are at the shrine of the Prophet of God, then you can cry to your heart's content, share whatever you are feeling with him. If you wish, despite my death I will stay with you, this separation will be temporary only, we will meet in our dreams. Death does not have the courage to break our relationship."

After placating Bano with great difficulty, the Imam returned to his sister.

"Come, let me say my parting words to the one who is ailing. Come with me, I do not have the courage to go alone. Who knows how he will suffer after I am no more. He may insist on coming with me, but if you are with me you will be able to pacify him."

The Imam arrived at Sajjad's tent with his sister. He was burning with fever, his eyes had turned up, his breath was like hot air rushing through a blowpipe, he tossed and turned restlessly. He had been reduced to a mere skeleton.

"This last lamp is also trying hard to withstand the storm of death. Cruel and ruthless, death has broken all bounds and is running wild with its jaws wide open."

His aunt fanned him with a corner of her chadar, wiped the sweat from his forehead, and lovingly called out to him repeatedly, "Sajjad, my prince, open your eyes. My precious son, look, your Baba is here."

"Baba, where is Baba? Why did you forget me, Baba? I still have some life left in my body, I have been waiting for so long." He turned his gaze looking for the Imam.

To overcome his dizziness, the Imam had paused to lean against the entrance of the tent.

"Baba, respected Baba, what is this blood? Are you wounded?" Sajjad tried to sit up, but trembled and became unsteady. The Imam came forward quickly and steadied his son.

"No, son, the body is fine, but yes, the heart and the mind are deeply wounded. The story of this blood in which I am bathed today is very long, a story that people will tell until the end of time, one that they will narrate, but it will still not end. This is the blood of truth, the blood of Islam, the blood of innocence and goodness. There is very little time my son, and I do not have the strength to repeat everything that this day has shown me since the break of dawn. Everyone has gone and now I must go, too."

"Everyone has gone? Where have they gone? Chacha Abbas left you alone and departed? Ali Akbar and Qasim also left? Aun and Muhammad, who would give their lives for you, they have gone, too? Where did they all go?"

"They have gone to the place where all of us will go to one day. You are ill, you do not have the strength to hear about it, but before I go I want to say something to you."

“Baba, I do not understand anything, what are you saying? Everyone left us and has gone, you are also leaving, leaving me in this condition. I am not going to live for long, please, in God’s name, bury me before you go. Will you leave me at the mercy of wild animals? No, Baba, do not do this to me.”

The Imam’s ailing son became hysterical. He grasped his father’s cloak with both hands. “No, Baba, do not bury me in this deserted place. I am terrified of this desolation, this place already looks and feels like a graveyard. Please, in God’s name, bury me at the feet of my grandfather.”

“It is not your time yet, Sajjad, you have to live, my son. After I am gone, you will be the only one left to protect the widows and orphans. My dearest, take good care of them.”

“Oh, so are you going into battle with your enemy? This cannot be, Baba Jaan. I did not expect Chacha Abbas to betray us. Phupi Jaan spoiled Ali Akbar so much, how sad that he has also abandoned you, and did Qasim leave Kubra in agony or is she dead?”

“No, that unfortunate girl is alive.”

“Let me get up, I am still alive. You will not fight while I live. The first right of martyrdom is mine. Everyone has left, but I am still here.”

“You think our dear ones have left us, that they have escaped to save their lives? No, my dear, all of them have been martyred one by one, in support of your ill-fated Imam. Abbas, Ali Akbar, Jafar, Muhammad, Osman, Qasim, Aun and Muhammad, and even little Ali Asghar, they all were martyred on the battlefield, like proud and brave soldiers.”

“Ali Asghar, too! Ahhh, Baba, but he was just a baby, how did jihad become compulsory for him? He had just started crawling, how did he go to the battlefield?”

"He had had no water for three days, I took him so that I could ask for some on his behalf, but instead of water he received an arrow on his neck."

Sajjad struck his head. "Oh God, why am I still alive?"

"Because you have to stay alive. Today, it is easy to die and difficult to live. And this is your jihad—you have to live, you have to suffer the agony of dying an emotional death a thousand times, but you must live. Listen carefully, my beloved son, I have received my summons. It is possible that the tyrants will start terrorising the women and children. My brave son, be strong, the battle is not over yet. This is just the beginning. This struggle will continue until the end of time. The oppressed and the powerless will keep fighting in order to safeguard their rights, they will shed blood, drop by drop their blood will collect, and then one day it will turn into a raging deluge that will drown the oppressors. Those who survive the martyrs who have given up their lives in the battlefield today will swallow poison, one drop at a time, and carry on this fight. You are the son of a warrior, it is now your duty to continue the fight. Your weak and feeble shoulders will have to bear the weight of a very heavy burden...this is your jihad. All right, my son, may God bless you with the power to fulfil your duty. May God keep you in his care, my courageous son."

The father's words breathed new life into the half-dead, sickly son.

"Your command is God's command, my master, I will live and will drink the poison with pride."

"You are not suffering from a sense of inferiority because you are vulnerable and helpless?"

"No, Baba, pray that I fulfil my obligations satisfactorily."

"God willing, you will." The Imam kissed his son's forehead and quickly turned around to leave.

“Baba, you are leaving, but please do me this favour—lift the curtain on the tent’s entrance so that I can see you until you disappear from sight. Oh God, I do not even have the strength for the honour of helping you get up on Zuljanah.”

Imam Husain lifted the curtain and went out.

Zainab felt her heart breaking when she saw her brother leave. She ran forward and blocked his way.

“I promised Amma that as long as there is life in my body I will not let my brother suffer the slightest harm. You shame me before Amma by going into the battlefield. I will not let you go.”

“Zainab, come to your senses, still your restless heart. I have to go.”

“Still my heart? Where is my heart? My heart is broken, its fragments are now mixed with the sands of Karbala!”

Agitated and overcome with distress, the brother embraced his younger sister.

“Beloved sister, how will I ever repay your love? You were so young but you never let us feel the absence of our mother. Is there any sister who can sacrifice her own beloved children for the sake of her brother? Not just me, but the entire Arab nation will acknowledge this sacrifice with gratitude. O my courageous and heroic sister, you are a woman and yet the heart of a brave and fearless person beats in your bosom.”

“No, my dear brother, I am very faint-hearted. After Amma passed away, I never imagined that there would be another mountain of sorrow that I would have to confront. What other pain could there be after this, I thought? But then when I was a young woman, my older brother was martyred and the grief my heart bore was so great that I lost my will to live. This black day that I am fated to witness now has robbed me of all my senses. There is no place for

new wounds in this heart. Have pity on me. I will not let you go to the battlefield even if the world comes to an end. All night I was hearing the sound of Amma's crying. Again and again, I saw her in my dreams, she looked sad and perplexed, head uncovered, in her bare feet and she was searching frantically for her precious gems in the grains of sand. My dear brother, take me with you to the battlefield."

"No..."

"Who will support you when you fall, who will look after you when you are drenched in blood? When you collapse after being attacked by spears and swords, who will pick you up? Take me with you. My body will shield you from the arrows and spears that come towards you. I wish to take my last breath in your arms, my brother."

"No, Zainab, no."

"Is it because I, the wretched one, am a weak woman?"

"You are a woman but, by God, you are the daughter of the Lion of God. Only a coward would regard you as weak."

"Then please do not dismiss my pleas. This is the first time I have asked you for something, I will not step away with my hands empty. If you cannot grant me my wish, then take out your sword and get me out of the way because I will not move from here as long as I am alive."

"Suicide is forbidden, and you and I are not separate from each other. Don't act like a child, Zainab. Come, open your arms and hold me, and I will be with you until the Day of Resurrection. After I am gone, you will be in charge of the widows and orphans. Sajjad is alone, he is sick, he will not be able to carry this heavy burden without your help. It is you who will have to take care of him. Forget that you are a woman. At this time you are the leader of this wrecked and ravaged caravan. What will happen after I am gone is not

hidden from you. These wild beasts will not leave this sick boy alone. They will stoop to looting, pillaging, and mistreating the women. You are Asadullah's brave daughter, you are the most courageous woman among these poor, ill-fated women. Listen carefully, Zainab. After I am gone, it will not be as difficult to die as it will be to remain alive. This is your Imam's order, that you live, and prepare yourself to suffer the worst kind of tyranny and oppression there is in this world."

"I wish death would come to me."

"No, Zainab, your death will be the death of my sacrifice, the end of my objectives. Our blood will be absorbed in the sands of this battlefield without having served any purpose. People will forget the purpose for which we sacrificed our heads here. The winds of time will erase all the imprints on the sand. Coming generations will unknowingly set up cities on this battlefield of death. For this reason, you must remember what you have seen and what you will witness next, what you have felt and sensed, and what even now is flashing before your burning eyes. Do not let these flames get extinguished. Look, Zainab, look to your heart's content, at the bodies caked in blood and dust, lying on the scorching sand. Look at me, your beleaguered Imam, whose body is weary and sapped of its strength because of his wounds, this blood. Look at this blood in which I am drenched, this blood is the blood of my heart and that of your children. See the redness of this blood—will you let this blood be shed in vain? Zainab, this is the blood of the message of the Prophet of God, the blood of Islam's values and principles, of justice, tolerance and human dignity. Look at it carefully. This is the same blood that Baba shed when he was prostrate before God. Do not forget, my beloved sister, and do not let the world

forget that these innocent eyes, filled with maternal love, saw such a horrifying Satanic dance."

The sight of his sister's eyes wide open in shock moved the Imam to tears.

He said lovingly, "What can I do, Zainab? Your brother can only give you this gift of sorrow and anguish. I am otherwise impoverished, but the Creator has generously blessed your brother with the wealth of grief and suffering. May God bless every human being with a mother, sister and daughter like you. And yes, remember that when these beasts slaughter me, do not rush out in panic from your tent."

"What difference will it make? Will these tyrants leave us alone, show us respect and let us stay in our tents?"

"No, they will forcibly pull away your chadars, they will make you walk from city to city as if you were part of a carnival, they will drag you out from your tents and dishonour you."

"So why then should we remain inside?"

"Because then they will not be able to say that the women of the Prophet's family had already shamed themselves by removing their chadars, that they ran out wildly towards the battlefield with their faces uncovered. We didn't dishonour them, they dishonoured themselves, they will say. They will find a reason to justify their tyranny, they will have an excuse, and they will use it to deceive people. A soldier panics in the battlefield, the sight of women with their faces uncovered can drive him crazy, they will say. If the women had stayed quietly inside their tents then no one would have even thought about bothering them. People will believe these justifications; the behaviour of the soldiers will be blamed on the chaos and turmoil of the battlefield. But despite all this, I still hold onto the faint hope that these

men are, after all, from the community of the Prophet, they might hesitate to dishonour the women of their Prophet's family. Perhaps that way they will be able to escape the horrors that await them in their next life, for committing one sin after another."

"You are still worried about these cursed men," Zainab said bitterly.

"Yes, Zainab, I am also a human being. One man's ignominy is the ignominy of all humanity. The savagery of one group will cast a shadow over all mankind. And also, Zainab, not all these men are fiends. There are some who have been lured into waging this battle against me. You know, when they see me unarmed they start trembling and quaking as if I am not an old man, beleaguered and brutalised by fate, but the angel of death. They hang their heads in shame and fear, as they envision what is in store for them in the afterlife. They are incomplete human beings, fragile toys. Their reins are in the hands of a few devils who steer them in whatever direction they wish. Yes, I want to save them. The only difference between them and me is that I did not bow down to tyranny and they did. Even now, if one of them lifts his bowed head, he comes over to my side."

"Oh God, how unfortunate is this nation that is slaughtering my brother instead of benefitting from a learned philosopher like him," Zainab sighed sorrowfully.

The Imam placed a hand on her shoulder.

"This is my request as well as my order. Regardless of how I fare, no woman must step out of her tent. I am forced to entrust you with this task because Sajjad is too sick to be in charge. May God be your protector. Go inside now, hold Sakina to your bosom—she might run after me if she sees me leaving."

"Let me at least help you get onto Zuljanah."

The Imam kept saying no, but she grabbed the reins of the horse and looked wildly around her. Abbas, Qasim, Ali Akbar, Jafar, Osman...how negligent these children are! None of them is here for the honour of holding onto the reins of their master's horse. She knew the Imam could not climb onto Zuljanah without support. But all his helpers were 'asleep' on the battlefield.

The Imam placed his cracked, bloody lips, parched from three days of thirst, on her forehead.

Zainab encircled Zuljanah's neck with her arms, kissed his forehead and whispered in his ear, "Zuljanah, take good care of my dear brother." Then she hid her face in her hands and keeling over, ran inside. The Imam gazed despondently at the curtain behind which Zehra-e-Saani had disappeared.

"May God protect you, my dear ones," the Imam murmured and spurred his horse.

Zuljanah did not budge.

The Imam pulled firmly at the reins. A frightened, stifled sound emerged from the horse's mouth and he first moved his head to the side, then towards his rear. The Imam lowered his head and saw that little Sakina was holding onto the horse's tail with her hands and was weeping.

"What is the matter, my precious daughter?" The Imam alighted from the horse.

"Baba, hold me close just one more time."

The father and daughter forgot the bloody battle for a moment and clung to each other.

"Sakina Bibi? Hai, people, where is my Sakina?" Zainab was heard calling out for her niece.

"Go, my princess, your aunt is calling you."

The Imam handed his daughter over to Zainab, who held her to her bosom and hastily stumbled back into the tent. From his tent Sajjad saw this tragic sight and trembled in pain. His strength gave out, and he fell in a swoon.

Zainab Bint Ali went to every tent and began issuing orders, reinforcing the Imam's command. She embraced one, lifted another one up from the sand, left Kubra with her sick brother, Sajjad, told Abbas's wife to go and console Bano, and then herself began reciting Quranic *aayats* in her quivering voice. Sitting next to her sick brother, Kubra fanned him with a corner of her chadar. A few wedding bangles were still on her wrist. Her small hand clutched her bosom, she was lost in sad thought. Her shattered glass bangles had left a few drops of blood on her wrists that dripped and fell on her shirt, like leaking henna.

Umme Rubab was sitting in one corner of the tent, mechanically straightening and folding Ali Asghar's shirts. The one who would wear them was asleep without a coffin in the earth. Sometimes, she would hold the garments to her eyes and kiss them, then suddenly would regain her senses and remember that Ali Asghar was gone, leaving her lap empty for all eternity. There will be no fragrant flowers in this lap any more, never again will she feel his soft, warm touch.

"You are gone, my beloved son. You had had enough of your mother's lap in just six months? Sisters, my moon has disappeared behind the clouds of death. Last night, he fell asleep from exhaustion. No, he did not fall asleep, he fainted. I, too, dozed off, and then suddenly I felt as if someone was shaking me and I woke up. What did I see? Fatima Zehra is standing at the head of the bed, shedding tears. She says, 'Allah, he sleeps so deeply. The baby is hungry, Dulhan

Begum, and you are sleeping?' I said, 'Ammi Jaan, my milk has dried up, and he is so weak that he has no strength left to suckle...' I tried to explain but she kept crying. Well, my son, now your thirst is quenched, you have crawled to the Spring of Kausar, your grandmother must have recognised you. My precious one, do not complain to your Dadi about this unfortunate, miserable mother. If she calls out to you, jump into her lap and say, please send for my mother as well, she doesn't want to live any more. Your grandmother will be filled with great sorrow when she sees your blood-stained shirt. It is not my fault, I had dressed you in a new pink shirt. But she will think your mother is careless. And, my beloved, hide the wound from the arrow that pierced your neck, she will be distraught if she sees it."

Zainab was looking at her sister-in-law with vacuous eyes. Every word she uttered was like an arrow piercing through her heart. The noise and commotion of the battlefield was drowned out by Umme Rubab's wails. Sakina had fainted in Zainab's arms, her hands and feet were numb, her breath, shallow and slow. Zainab's heart stopped beating for a minute. She shook Sakina.

"Sakina Bibi, look at me, open your eyes." Startled, Sakina opened her eyes and Zainab heaved a sigh of relief.

The mothers pat their children to sleep with great difficulty and then, seeing their parched lips, sunken eyes and uneven breathing, they are beset by all sorts of doubts. Fearing their children have died, they shake them and are relieved to see them cry. Then they pace up and down trying to put them back to sleep. If the children are awake they cry, if they are asleep their mothers become apprehensive and rub their hands on their backs, listening to their hearts to make sure they are alive, or feel their pulse. This

is a catastrophe that continuously weighs down the poor unfortunate mothers and their hapless children.

Imam Husain Ibn Ali was advancing towards the enemy. How dreadful was this moment of anguish that had befallen the beloved son of Fatima Zehra. Karbala's earth was drenched in the blood of his near and dear ones. Friends, companions, sons, brother, sister's sons, brother's sons were lying, their heads severed, their bodies trampled under horses' hooves. The Imam looked around with blood-shot eyes. On one side, the vicious beasts were standing like a steel wall. On the other lay the remains of a trampled humanity covered in blood and sand. How many scars are there on the bosom of Karbala? There is Abdullah Ibn Omar's crushed body, some distance away are the shattered corpses of Hurr and his young son, a few steps ahead lies the dead body of his brother, Musib Ibn Yazid. The protection of the elders has also been stolen.

Burayr Hamdani was one of the Prophet of God's very dear and valued friends. He was elderly, but he had shown greater courage than many young men. He had tried very hard to bring around the misguided, errant nation:

“O you who shed the blood of the righteous ones, O you who are thirsting for the blood of valiant soldiers, who was the poor, unfortunate woman who gave you birth? You are the devil's vomit. Remember, before you shed the blood of the Prophet's children, you will have to deal with his loyal slaves and attack me, so that I can punish you for your tyranny.”

The enemy was unnerved when they witnessed his courage. Ibn Sa'ad commanded that the old lion be surrounded and killed. The cowardly jackals assaulted him from all around and martyred him.

A few feet away from the river bank lies the standard-bearer, Abul Fazl Abbas, with both arms severed. Over there, look how magnificently he slumbers, Qasim Ibn Hasan, the bridegroom of one night. Not too far away, Aun and Muhammad are asleep in each other's embrace.

The Imam held on to Zuljanah's mane with both hands in order to calm the fire raging in his chest and bending over the horse, he began to heave. Innumerable knives plunged through his heart, the sight of his grown son's body extinguished the light from his world, his spirit struggled to be released from its physical constraints. With trepidation and hesitation, he glanced sideways at the tiny mound of earth where he had buried his fragile six-month-old child, and he let out a scream, "O God Almighty, why am I still alive? How much longer before the Day of Resurrection arrives?"

From his heart rose the cry: *Husain! This is the moment of trial; there are many more hurdles to overcome.*

The Imam's back was bent with the sorrows he had endured, his faltering feet repeatedly slipped out of the stirrups, his every breath tore through his throat with the force of a steel saw, his hair, drenched in blood, was glued to his cheeks, the wounds from the arrows that he couldn't pull out, were now bleeding again.

When the enemy forces saw the grandson of the Prophet of God emerge alone from his tent and advance towards the battlefield, they became hysterical. The setting sun that was taking its last breath looked like a large stain of blood

behind the Imam's back. It seemed determined to shoot its last arrows into the eyes of the tyrants to blind them. The waves of the Euphrates were dashing helplessly against the riverbank. Curse the water that has been deprived of caressing the feet of the Imam—the steel-clad armies had placed a lock upon its lips.

The heat, coupled with the sand eddies, hurled embers into the eyes of these stone-hearted soldiers. It seemed to them that, seated on Zuljanah, the Imam was the wrath of God coming towards them. The blood-soaked band of his turban soared to the skies, and emerging as a dot against the sky his presence soon seemed to encompass the entire universe. He is not alone. With him are the oppressed from the past, present and future, victims who hold in their hands the weapons of innocence and virtue, whose bleeding bodies are protected by the armour of faith. Who can fight such a mighty army?

The weak-in-faith tribals tremble fearfully. It seems to them that every inch of the plain of Karbala is crowded with angels. With two children astride on his shoulders, the Prophet of God is walking towards them, laughing happily. On his head is the protection of Fatima Zehra's sacred chadar. Melting like wax toys, the stone-hearted soldiers began falling off their horses, their shields turned over, swords dropped from their hands, their bows got twisted, their banners fell and rolled in the dust. They had been sent to punish the enemies of Islam. If the Prophet of God and his family are the enemies of Islam, who then are its friends?

The troops immediately turned around and started running away.

Ibn Sa'd called out, "Where are you running off to, you who have sworn your allegiance to Amirul Momineen Yazid

Ibn Mu'awiya? Don't you see that this old man is suffering from three days of thirst and starvation, he has been bleeding profusely? O brave and valiant warriors of Syria, why do you hesitate? We are close to victory now, he can barely see, in a moment victory will be ours."

But the troops were routed. They were rushing around wildly, it was as if they were deaf, mute and blind. They wanted to stop but their conscience was forcing them to run. Ibn Sa'ad looked beseechingly at Shimr, who signalled his special force. Some of those who were running helter-skelter fell from their horses splattered in blood and dust, while others finally returned to their positions.

"This is denying your blessings, you cowards! You want to undo all that we have achieved? By getting ensnared in superstition, you are rejecting a lifetime of pleasure and comfort," roared Shimr.

Ibn Sa'ad was cleverer than Shimr. At that moment, he opened bags of gold, scooped up fistfuls of coins and threw them towards the retreating troops. Their footsteps halted, then turned around.

"This is nothing. It is just a small example of our emperor's generosity, only a dim image. The royal treasure is far greater than Qarun's treasure. Don't lose your nerve, young men, if you slip up now you will curse the day you were born. You won't find refuge in any corner of this world. Your homes and families will be destroyed, your wives will be sold in the bazaars like slaves, your daughters will be made to dance naked in tea-houses."

The soldiers gathered the gold, filled their pockets and returned to their positions, but they still didn't place their hands on their swords. Threats and rebukes were a part of their daily routine.

They said stubbornly, "Who in the world can fight a mighty army such as this?"

"You blind fools! Idiots, where is the mighty army? Husain's small band of soldiers was finished off a long time ago. Open your eyes and look closely, this is all an illusion. Your faith in the unknown is deceiving you by making you see these apparitions. That man riding towards us on a half-dead horse, is alone, old, and burdened with sorrows."

The soldiers rubbed their eyes and looked again, carefully. The Imam was, indeed, alone!

The war drums were beaten vigorously, lightning crackled, hands reached for swords, the fallen banners were lifted up once again, the horses that had been dashing around with no one to control them were reigned in with whiplashes, shields were lined up in rows, the lancers and javelin-throwers stood in their place.

When the Imam saw life returning to the corpse, he realised that the momentary spell cast by terror had been lifted. The conscience of these men, buried under the weight of gold, had finally perished. He edged Zuljanah forward and tried to reason with them one last time.

"O Syrians, look at your hands. Is the blood of the Prophet's family that stains them not enough? By God, I am not concerned about my life. I do not consider myself to be alive any more. But if you wish, you can still save yourselves from carrying the burden of my blood. Go back to your wives and children. I forgive you. I will spend the rest of my life taking care of my grandfather's grave. I promise you, I am not worried about myself. I have no reason to live any more, but if you kill me, you too will die. Your conscience will die, your souls will be destroyed, you and your future generations will not find peace anywhere on earth. Be afraid

of this spiritual death because, compared to it, your physical death will be inconsequential."

Ibn Sa'ad, gripped by this frightening thought, feared that everything they had gained so far was about to be lost. The Imam's words would ruin all that had been achieved with such difficulty. So he screamed at the top of his voice, "Do not listen! Stuff your fingers in your ears! Husain is a sorcerer. He has deadly magical powers. If you listen to him, you will lose your way." Then he addressed the Imam, "Do you think we are donkeys? We are not here to discuss conditions with you. Our Caliph has commanded that we obtain an oath of allegiance from you, and if you do not agree then your head should be severed and presented to him."

"You fool, do you still hope that I will take the oath of allegiance? When the heads of so many friends and dear ones lie in the dust, what then is the value of my head or heart? O Syrians, are you not sated even after so much bloodshed? Has your thirst not been quenched yet? If you want, you can still redeem yourselves. I am worried about my grandfather's people. Despite what they have done to me, my sense of duty, my legacy instructs me to abstain from becoming the reason for your veering off the path of righteousness. Oh, you simple people! Your death will follow mine. You will save your bodies, but your souls will be lost forever. There is still time, you can save yourselves from shedding my blood."

Hearing the Imam's words, the soldiers began to waver once more.

Ibn Sa'ad became agitated and shouted: "Do not listen to him! Husain Ibn Ali's magic will be your undoing. If it travels from your ears to your heart, you will lose everything. The Imam's death is life for you. Do you know what fate awaits you if you return without the Imam's head? Our ruler is cruel

and tyrannical, whose influence extends far and wide. You won't be able to find any place in this world to hide in. But if Husain's head is ours then your rewards will be plentiful, the treasures of Arabia will be at your feet."

There was a commotion in the ranks. The soldiers became agitated. The faces of their wives and children flashed before their eyes. They started beating their chests with their own weapons.

Ibn Sa'ad addressed Imam Husain, "You are trying to trick us. All this trouble is for one head, dear sir, a head that our great and mighty emperor wants. You have sacrificed your friends and loved ones for no reason. Without your head, these others don't count."

Then he called out to the Syrians: "What are you waiting for? Don't lose courage now, especially when you are at your destination. You will suffer greatly if you do."

"I have done my duty. I have made every effort to save you from the punishment that awaits you in the next life. If it is my head you want, then you will not get it so easily. Which one of you will come and fight me?"

The Imam drew a heavy sigh and bent down to pat Zuljanah. "My friend, the time has come."

Shimr and Ibn Sa'ad had thought that the lion was spent. He wouldn't be able to fight two or three strong and energetic wrestlers. But when one soldier after another began to fall, they lost their senses. Husain Ibn Ali displayed such a remarkable example of the art of combat that the enemy was left in a daze. The ones who had been martyred earlier were like stars in the presence of this sun that shone over the entire universe. Husain's sword was a terrifying strike of lightning, it swooped like death, all the way down to the feet of the enemy. It was a river of rage that had no beginning

and no end. Was it a sword or the wrath of God? Such turmoil had not been unleashed even by the waves of the river Nile. Swiftly and artfully, it struck off hands and feet, glimmering, blinding the eyes with its glint, twisting and turning coyly at times, piling the earth with corpses, as it made its way through the lines, unscathed—it had become more audacious after it had had a taste of the enemy's blood. Instead of becoming blunt it was whetted, as if it had been sharpened on a whetstone. The sun was dazzled by its glare, and the more blood it drank the thirstier it became. It was like lightning that struck in a hundred places at the same time.

The bedazzled eyes of the Syrians were seeing magical visions.

"This is not Husain! This is the Conqueror of Khyber, the Lion of God himself on Zuljanah. Run, save your faith and your world, run!"

A commotion rose within the ranks once more. Shimr tried to stop his special forces. Where were they going?

It is a violation of the rules of warfare to attack retreating jackals. So the Imam reined in Zuljanah and stopped for a few moments of rest. The army continued to withdraw and moved some distance away. The Imam wearily lowered his head on Zuljanah's back and tried to catch his breath.

A dervish happened to be passing that way. He saw an army of thousands running, fearing a lone rider. Then he observed the blood-spattered sword in the rider's hand and he was furious: surely this is a sorcerer before whom all human forces are weakened and defeated. Indeed, he has used his supernatural powers to pile up these corpses of innocent men.

He advanced boldly and said, "You, what sort of sorcerer are you? What did these innocent men do to harm you so

that you cut them up like carrots and radishes? How woeful that you didn't take pity on the children either, nor did you spare the young ones. You don't appear to be a Muslim, or else you would not have defiled a corpse by cutting its hands off, because Islam strictly forbids such barbarism. You can turn me into dust with your magical powers, but I will not refrain from saying that I have never witnessed a more cruel and tyrannical man before in my life."

Imam Husain gazed at the stranger with bloodshot eyes. A bitter smile quivered on his lips and he bent down. The mendicant thought that his passionate accusations had melted stone so he continued, "Thank God you repent your actions. Perhaps God will forgive your transgressions. I don't care if you kill me, but you must tell me what you have gained by soaking this desert with the blood of these innocents. In God's name, tell me what faith allows one to slaughter children."

Imam Husain smiled again.

"O stranger, you harbour a terrible misunderstanding. These children, these youths, they are my dear ones, my relatives, who have been slaughtered after three days of hunger and thirst. I am a Muslim, and those who have slaughtered these innocents are also followers of Islam. O ignorant man, if I had been a sorcerer, my six-month-old baby would not have died in my arms from an arrow shot through his neck. I would have used all my magic to pour a few drops of water into the dying child's mouth. If you think that this army of thousands, these soldiers guarding the banks of the river are oppressed victims and I, suffering from three days of thirst am a tyrant, then this is a mistake on your part."

"O God, what is this I hear? Forgive me, brother, I am a stranger in these parts. In God's name, please tell me what

is happening here. The river gushes right in front of you and yet you are thirsty? Who are you? I have a lot of water." Saying this, he poured cool fresh water from his water-skin into a bowl. "Here, drink this. I will refill my water-skin from the river."

The Imam held the bowl of splashing water with trembling hands. The fragrance of water sent a current through his body, his parched tongue moved to the edge of his lips, his life-force gathered in his eyes. The Imam lifted the bowl to his lips with unsteady hands. But before he could take a drink, his gaze travelled around him. The blood of the thirsty martyrs burst into flames on the sands of Karbala. Fiery whirlwinds danced on Ali Asghar's little grave. The Imam closed his eyes and spilled the water on the bosom of Karbala's scorching sand.

"Alas! Alas, a thousand times! My innocents were martyred when they were thirsty, this water will be like liquid fire in my throat."

The stranger began to tremble fearfully.

"In God's name, have pity on me and tell me who you are. You look familiar. I have often seen your face in the mosques, my heart recognises you but my brain can't identify you."

The Imam couldn't say to him that he was the beloved grandson of the Prophet of God, the dear son of the Lion of God and Fatima Zehra. So, he lowered his head with humility and said, "I am Husain."

"Husain? Which Husain?"

"Husain Ibn Ali Ibn Abi Talib."

"Husain Ibn Ali—Dear God, take pity on me." The dervish became hysterical. He fell at the Imam's feet and sobbed loudly. "My Master, forgive this slave's transgression.

What blasphemous words have come out of this wretched mouth! My sense of reason failed me, forgive me, Maula."

"It is not your fault, my brother, no one recognises Husain Ibn Ali today. Everyone has turned his gaze away. A steel curtain has fallen over a Muslim's sense of reasoning. Your journey will be strenuous, continue on your way. My enemies have also had enough rest by now, they will soon be ready to attack again. Look over there, the soldiers have eaten and washed and are revived. The men are being re-positioned."

"My Master, please give me an opportunity to serve you by giving up my life."

"No, my dear brother. Husain will be fortunate to have at least one friend left. I will not be able to carry the burden of your sacrifice. Go, brother, why do you want to risk your life?"

But the dervish begged. "How can I live in a world where men like Husain are killed, where their children are slaughtered, where the family of the founder of Islam is put to the sword by the followers of Islam? No, my Master, what do I have to live for? If you do not give me permission, I will kill myself by dashing my head at your feet."

With great difficulty the Imam held him up, embraced him and kissed his forehead.

"Go, my brother, I have no right to stop you. This battle is being fought by the righteous and you, too, are free to engage in jihad for your beliefs and your faith."

The dervish set upon the enemy's army like a great calamity. Heads began to fall as they were severed. The soldiers had been busy joking and chatting, telling each other there was no urgency, that they would get to slaughter the Imam eventually. When this unexpected catastrophe

befell them they were taken completely by surprise. They lost their nerve and chaos broke out in the ranks.

But how long could it last? Finally, the enemy regained their composure and surrounded the dervish. The Imam rushed to his aid, annihilating those who came in his way. Zuljanah's rage had been roused as well. He had become a part of his master's body and was able to anticipate his every move. His actions were a reflection of just how aware he was of the perilous situation they were in.

The Imam's sudden onslaught created another disruption among the troops. Along with his special forces, Shimr had also been observing the spectacle that was unfolding before him.

He spoke to his executioners gently: "Friends, this is the only chance we have. We will be victorious if we attack Husain from the rear. He will be helpless if he is surrounded from everywhere. Let's go, my brave ones, the reigns of seven kingdoms are within your reach, your future generations will enjoy the treasures of jewels and gold, the governors will be beholden to you. Take the Imam's head, and your future fortunes will be guaranteed. If another unit gets it done first, you will be left with nothing. Come, my brave ones. God willing, we will sever Husain's head and then offer the afternoon prayers."

All at once an evil madness descended upon the hordes in the desert. From all four sides the cowardly jackals closed in on the severely wounded, weary lion.

Black whirlwinds of sand began to blow. The plain of Karbala turned into a doomsday site, a shower of arrows commenced. One merciless soldier struck Husain, slitting open the folds of his turban. He bent down and leaned on

Zuljanah's neck, the stirrups slipped from his feet. Zuljanah was anxious to keep his master safe and get him out of this mire of blood and dust. His own legs had been transformed into javelins.

Aiming carefully, Abul Hunoon shot an arrow that pierced the spot where the Prophet of God would kiss Husain's neck.

The land of Karbala quaked. The face of the sun turned black. The waves of the Euphrates became red like live coals and thrashed about violently. Imam Husain Ibn Ali fell to the ground.

The moment the Imam fell, instead of feeling victorious, the army was seized by an uncontrollable hysteria. Hacking and crushing each other, as if suddenly blinded, the soldiers ran around wildly like evil spirits. Inhuman sounds escaped from their mouths, their faces had turned yellow and blue, satanic laughter echoed in their pursuit, sand burned in their throats, eyes and noses like hot ash, they darted this way and that—where, they did not know.

Ibn Sa'ad was sobbing and shrieking violently, his unfurled turban hung from his neck, the hair on his head stood on end. In just a few moments, the battlefield was bare. The Imam had fallen on the hot sand and fainted. Zuljanah was rubbing his forehead on the spot where his master's blood had been spilled. How helpless and powerless an animal is in the face of man's cruelty and tyranny.

"Zuljanah, I entrust my brother to your care, you will bring him back safe and sound to me," the ill-fated sister had said to him.

The Imam suddenly regained consciousness and opened his eyes. He was surprised as well as frustrated. Why was he still alive? Was there anything left to suffer, were there

any more arrows left in fate's quiver? Perhaps imprisonment and incarceration, the long travel to Kufa and Syria—he didn't have any expectations of mercy or consideration from them. Would this broken body be dragged around now? With great difficulty he braced himself up with his elbows, crawled to a tree, and resting his back against the trunk, gasped for air.

Where were those 'brave' warriors? Would they leave him in this near-death state? If death did not come on its own, how much longer would he have to convulse painfully? Why had these men not slit his throat? Would blood continue to seep into the sand, drop by drop, and would no one rid him of the agonies of death? He could not drag himself to his camp either—in the turmoil that had resulted from the fighting, he had come far and there were mountains of sand to scale. But he could dimly discern the entrance to the tents in the distance. The women and children were searching for the Imam with a frightened, cowering gaze. Has the Imam been imprisoned? He is not visible among the piles of dead bodies. Why is Zuljanah standing alone with his head bowed?

The Imam immediately lowered his body to avoid being seen. If the children caught a glimpse of him they would immediately run to him, would not be able to control themselves and would end up disobeying him.

A smile full of pride and affection appeared on the Imam's parched, bleeding lips. How wonderful and obedient is his army of young children and widowed women. Today, for them, the command of a fallen leader, battered and wounded, is no less than the command of God.

The enemy's forces were still in a chaotic, bewildered state. The magnitude of their own crime had left them reeling.

Shimr said, "What is the urgency? You are all exhausted, wash and freshen up. We will behead him in due course. Husain doesn't have the strength to escape."

A stranger happened to be passing that way. He stopped to get a drink of water from the river and shrank back in fear when he saw that it was red. When he glanced around he saw a battlefield littered with death and carnage. There were piles of dead bodies and soldiers resting at a distance. He saw signs of life in one body and when he looked at it closely, the corpse suddenly opened its eyes. Resting against the trunk of a tree was an old man, waiting for death. The traveller quickly came closer.

"O Brother, what is happening here? What kind of battle is this? Who is fighting whom? One army is over there, where has the other army gone? This is all very strange, I don't understand anything."

"I am the other army," the Imam replied with a bitter smile. "Yes, I am the only one left now. I had seventy-two brave warriors, now I am alone."

"What battle was this? Seventy-two on one side and countless on the other?"

"Well, yes, that is how it was. You seem to be a stranger to these parts. You have no knowledge of what happened before and are unaware of what is happening now."

"I was out of the country for a long time, I have just returned from Medina. I don't understand anything. There is silence everywhere, and fear and terror prevent people from saying anything."

"How did you happen to come this way?"

"I have been compelled to come here. It is a very sad story. I had no plans of travelling in this direction but I have come for the sake of an innocent little girl."

"A little girl?" The Imam drew a heavy sigh.

"She is a strange and sorrowful girl. My heart broke when I saw her. Whenever I travelled to Medina, I saw a pale, sick girl standing in her doorway, asking every traveller who passed by, 'O traveller, if you are heading towards Kufa please deliver a message to my father, you will be rewarded by God. He has not written nor has he come to see me.' I told her, 'Daughter, Kufa is not my destination, but I am going in that direction on some business and I will deliver your letter.' She immediately opened a knot in the corner of her chadar, took out a letter and gave it to me. You will be greatly surprised to hear that she is Sughra, the daughter of our Prophet's grandson, Hazrat Imam Husain Ibn Ali Ibn Abi Talib."

"Sughra!" The Imam's wounds split open and he began sobbing like a child.

"I became extremely agitated the moment I heard her story. I told her I will abandon everything and go and deliver her letter. I only have two wishes in my heart. The first is to have the good fortune of prostrating at the tomb of the Prophet, and the second, to bow at the feet of the last remaining heir to the Prophet's legacy, his grandson Husain."

"Ahh Sughra, my sick daughter...O traveller, if you have brought her letter then give it to me quickly. I have very little time, my friend. I am the ill-fated father of this girl; please make haste because the enemy's forces are lining up again. Now they are preparing to sever my head."

"You? You are Husain Ibn Ali? O Master, what is this I hear? What is this I see? Here is your letter, please give me permission to go into battle and deliver these villains to hell."

"No, brother, your life and your sacrifice will not make any difference now."

"Master, for God's sake, do not deprive me of this privilege. While you suffer this brutality, can I stand by and do nothing? I am a Muslim, Maula."

"These people who are planning to kill me, who have slaughtered my young brother, nephews, and son, who martyred my six-month-old thirsty baby right before my eyes... they too, by God's grace, are Muslims."

"May God curse them, may their kind be banished from this world. These men who drag the name of Islam through the filth are not your grandfather's followers, they are the offspring of Satan. I plead with you, in the name of the Prophet of God, in the name of Amirul Momineen, the Lion of God, please give me permission because the burden weighs heavily on my shoulders."

The traveller stood up and drew his sword, but the Imam gripped the hem of his shirt.

"You have accepted me as your Imam so you must obey my order. Use whatever means available to you to save your life and leave from here. There must be someone waiting for you, do not break their heart."

"Ya Imam, how did you guess that my motherless daughter, my only child, is counting the minutes till I return?"

"A heart in pain recognises another's suffering. I, too, have suffered the grief of separation from my daughter. But wait, let me read my little girl's letter."

Sughra's letter was soaked with tears:

My dear Baba, your Sughra still breathes. You have forgotten her, but remembering you, she weeps for hours, she thinks only of you. The beauty of Karbala has made you forget this sick, dying girl, but she stands in the doorway from morning to night, asking passersby for the address of those who have been separated from her. What was my crime, Baba, that you

stopped writing even two words to me about your well-being, that it didn't allow you to send for me? You must be thinking Sughra is dead, one less person to worry about. But Baba I am still alive. For God's sake, send for me or else I will cry so much that I will become blind. Everyone tells me to be patient, but I weep endlessly. For Abbas Chacha there is no one better than his precious Sakina, so, as far as he is concerned, Sughra can die. But alas, what about Akbar Bhai? Does he, too, have no concern for his ill-fated sister? If his marriage has been arranged, then please, for God's sake, send for me, otherwise I will take my own life. Asghar, God bless him, must be crawling by now. He won't even recognise me. Qasim Bhai is probably busy pampering his wife, why would he be thinking of me? Baba, please take pity on your Sughra and send for me."

The Imam sobbed uncontrollably as he read the letter.

He said to the traveller, "Listen my brother, your life is very dear to me because you can take my message back to my daughter. You will be rewarded by God if you do this for me. When you see her, try to comfort her. Tell her, 'Beloved of your father, may God not subject even an enemy to what your ill-fated father has witnessed. If you had seen any of it, your gentle heart would have exploded, you would not have been able to bear it. Your brother, Ali Akbar, has left us. There lies the corpse of the young man, his hand resting on his chest to hide his wound from me. Ali Asghar's grave is a few feet away, I buried him with these bleeding hands. After three days of thirst he received a three-headed arrow in his neck. Here, look, my beard is bright red with his blood. Abbas had his arms severed for two drops of water. My child, if you had seen all this you would have gone mad. How would you have endured the sight of Qasim's body, trampled under the horses' hooves? He donned the sehra

and then death took him in its clutches, destroying your innocent sister's happiness. Be patient, my beloved child, make your heart as strong as stone. O granddaughter of the Lion of God, this is what fate has in store for us. We also know what will happen after this. Death stands before me. Any time now your father's head will be separated from his body. It will be mounted on a spear and the body will be defiled. After this, the ruthless and rough treatment that the women and innocent children of my family will have to suffer, is not hidden from me. You are fortunate, Sughra, that you did not see any of this because, if you had your innocent heart would have been shattered."

The Imam closed his eyes wearily. Then he said to the traveller, "Go, my kind-hearted friend, may God keep you in His care."

"Your wish is my command, Master. What my eyes have seen now, I will never forget. Farewell, my master." The traveller kissed the Imam's feet and left quickly.

The Imam used all his strength to throw off his growing weakness and dizziness, raised his tired blood-stained eyes to the heavens and began his wait for death.

A strange distraction had overcome the Syrian army. No one was ready to sever the oppressed Imam's head from his body. Everyone was stung by fear of what was in store for them in the afterlife. The soldiers' eyes were wide with dread, their weapons hung from their bodies like a cumbersome burden. A person fights not just with weapons but also with his heart and mind. So many had been put to death because of their refusal to fight, but those left behind were afflicted with inertia. Ibn Sa'ad tried to encourage them to move towards the river to refresh themselves, but they turned away from it in fear, as if it were molten

lava, not water. The ones who gulped down a mouthful with difficulty fell down at the spot and, thrashing about agitatedly like slaughtered birds they died. God's wrath had begun to unfold, the poison of madness was slowly setting in. The heat of the desert, the emotional nature of the Arab people, and such a great tragedy—it was no surprise that the soldiers were disoriented and confused. That was when people turned their gaze upon Shimr Ibn Ziljaushan and fell flat on their faces with dread. The head on his shoulders was not human.

It was time for the afternoon prayers. Imam Husain prostrated in worship on the burning sand.

"O God, I am thankful to you that today I stand among the oppressed rather than the oppressors, that I am not a murderer but among those who have been murdered, because a murderer dies a thousand deaths."

When Shimr's horse balked in protest, he flayed the beast with his whip until the horse's hide ripped open.

From afar, Zainab observed Shimr's intent and clutched her bosom. It was as if his horse's hooves were bearing down on her. Suddenly, Imam Hasan's youngest son, Abdullah Ibn Hasan, ran out of the tent, frantic. His mother tried to restrain him, his aunt grabbed the hem of his shirt, but he managed to free himself and darted like an arrow towards the Imam, crying, "Amu, Amu."

With his arms spread out, he stood before his uncle like a shield and cried out to Shimr, "Beware, you cursed man, you will be annihilated if you dare to strike my uncle."

Shimr was dumbfounded when he saw the little boy. His brutal nature cowered before this youthful image of beauty and rage. The boy's thin, frail body was trembling with anger, his cheeks were blazing, the tiny earrings he wore as

amulets quivered in his ears. Shimr was frustrated as he felt a diminutive bud of humanity sprout in his heart.

"Finish this now," he ordered his companions.

The Imam tried to persuade the child to go back but he would not move. A warrior dealt a blow with his sword, a little hand was cut off and landed some distance away. The boy screamed in agony and, covered in blood, he fell into the Imam's lap, thrashing about in pain. More attacks followed, finally ending his life as he lay in his uncle's lap. The Imam held the boy's body close to his chest.

Shimr walked along with his horse, pulling it by its reins, and as he drew closer to the Imam, he quickly mounted it, grabbed the Imam's white hair drenched in blood, and with one jerk, straightened his body and placed one knee on his chest that was already riddled with wounds.

Feeling the edge of the dagger on his throat, the Imam opened his eyes. "Wait," he said with a smile. "Let me take a look at my killer's face."

Zainab felt her heart explode. She ran out of her tent with bare feet. Hearing his sister's cries and screams, the Imam, without looking at her, signalled to her to go back. Zainab turned and fell in a swoon on the scorching sand.

Shimr looked carefully for the spot on the Imam's neck where the Prophet had kissed him, and drew his dagger over it.

After slitting the Imam's throat, Shimr burst into devilish laughter and began dancing around wildly. This had an immediate psychological effect on the army and, all of a sudden, the hitherto inert troops were revived. They pranced around like evil spirits, and the depraved behaviour that Islam's sacred teachings had rooted out was reborn.

The plain of Karbala resounded with cries of "God is Great!" Victory drums resounded, the cymbals started clashing, the sun hid its face and fled from there, and the burning darkness of hell spread everywhere. Husain's head was raised on a spearhead.

Zainul Abidin struggled to his feet and stumbled out. His aunt immediately took charge. She brought him back inside with Fizza's help and fanned him with the hem of her shirt.

"Why am I still alive, Phupi Jaan?"

"Because you are now our Imam, the leader of this plundered caravan. Remember your father's last words: no one should do anything to encourage these tyrants to martyr you. Your life is very precious. If you leave us then my brother's lineage will end, the name of the Prophet will be obliterated. You have to live, not for yourself but for these orphans, you have to live for us unfortunate mothers and sisters."

Zainab Bint Ali's words provided Ibn Husain with some solace.

Sounds of inhuman cries and screams were heard continuously from the direction of the battlefield. The army was in the grip of a strange hysteria. Victorious soldiers started looting and plundering the tents in the Imam's encampment. They entered the enclosures and ran off with whatever they could find. The children cowered and hid in their mothers' laps, terrified at the sight of these beasts' faces.

How much was there to loot from these tents, anyway? The Imam had not left Medina with a treasure, neither did he possess extraordinary riches. The pillagers were sorely disappointed. They forcibly removed the veils from

the women's heads. Mothers hastily took off the bangles, bracelets, necklaces and earrings that they and their children were wearing and threw them in the middle of the tents. But Sakina was very attached to her earrings because Baba had given them to her as a gift on Eid. She covered her ears with her hands and huddled behind her sick brother, thinking that no one would harass her as long as she remained in hiding. But all this looting and ransacking was actually a psychological ploy to wipe out the fear of the Prophet's family from the hearts of the troops. It was, therefore, decided that no consideration or regard would be shown, thus preventing the soldiers from feeling any remorse.

Kholi Ibn Yazid Asbahi laughed as he advanced towards Sakina but Shimr pushed him aside. Striding forward, he seized his victim. He twisted the bracelets off her wrists but when he moved his hands towards her ear, Sakina screamed. The tyrant slapped her fragile cheeks and yanked off her earrings. The bleeding girl fainted in her brother's arms. Ibn Husain wanted to go after this cruel tormenter and grab his throat but, once again, his aunt held him back.

"No, no, my son, it will only encourage these wretches further. Just endure it, and also tolerate whatever insults are meted out, we will see how far their bestiality takes them."

After they were done with looting, the tents were set on fire. Not even the slightest consideration should be shown to the Imam's family—the soldiers must forget that these are the progeny of their Prophet. The play has to be performed with all the embellishments.

Zainab remembered her brother's words when she saw their tents afire: *Ali's brave daughter, do not let go of your courage, you are the commander of this plundered and pillaged army.*

And the daughter of the Destroyer of Khyber performed her role honourably. She gathered her scattered family and quickly moved everyone from the burning tents to those that had not been set ablaze yet. The tents had been pitched in a row and had interconnected entrances. The children and women were in agony, weak and dizzy from thirst, they sobbed but made no sound, their heads were uncovered, and they were doubled over in shame and humiliation. When the first tent was set on fire, Zainab took hold of their hands and pulled them to the second, trying to pacify them, sometimes even scolding them. When the second tent caught fire, everyone fled to the third. But the fire spread rapidly, and when they reached the last tent, Zainab asked Ibn Husain, "O Imam, what are your instructions now?"

"This is no time to worry about the veil. There is no recourse but to walk out of here and save ourselves from this fire of hell."

After this pronouncement from their Imam, the women and children came out and sought refuge on the sands, at some distance from the burning tents.

Sakina had come around. Covering both ears with her hands, she sat in a daze. Blood oozed down to her elbows. Their childhood forgotten, the young ones sat quietly and patiently like old men and women. A strange and terrifying silence permeated the air. A ghastly black night had descended upon the plain of Karbala to provide cover to the oppressed and long-suffering ones who sat forlornly on the sand.

Suddenly, the enemy's tents were alight with candles. Musical instruments came to life and preparations for celebrations started with full force. There was no end to the

wine and food, followed by orgies. In the excitement and frenzy of victory all scruples were abandoned.

But there was a group of soldiers that sat separately from the others, their heads together, in deep discussion. One or two said, "What happened to us today? Where was our humanity, how did it die? It is not the way of the Arab nation to terrorise women and children, to torment the sick and the helpless. Are we really Muslims, or are we faithful only in name? Our hearts are filled with the darkness of the bygone era of ignorance. Are we the community of the Prophet of God? Are we in a position to show our face to God after what we have done today? Will the Prophet of God help us receive forgiveness after we have slaughtered his loved ones so mercilessly? After we have insulted and slighted his daughters-in-law and his granddaughters?"

These like-minded soldiers slowly multiplied in numbers. They began to feel a deep hatred for Shimr and Ibn Sa'ad. As the night turned darker, their fear and hatred intensified. A few commanders conferred amongst themselves and then went to Ibn Sa'ad to rebuke him.

"You wretch! We heeded your command and committed such horrible brutality. We wish we could wipe you and your name from this world."

"May God curse you! You had differences with Husain Ibn Ali, but what harm had his companions and the young children done to you? You are sitting here enjoying a feast while the children of his family sit on the hot sand, half-dead with thirst and hunger. One can't even hear them cry anymore because they have lost the strength to weep, to protest."

"O cursed one, when there is a death in a family, the custom in the Arab nation dictates that even the mothers

do not nurse their babies until the coffin is taken to the graveyard. Then the family of the deceased is fed first, and only after that the visitors break bread. You have fed the entire army but not once did you even think about the unfortunate ones sitting in the dark. In the name of God, we cannot swallow a single morsel of food, this food is forbidden to us. Until those people don't break their fast, no one will touch this food."

Saying this, they tipped over the trays of rich, delectable foods, emptied the jugs of wine, and stood up with their swords drawn.

Ibn Sa'ad became alert when he observed the mood among his commanders. These rebellious ideas had to be thwarted before they spread through the ranks like poison. He hung his head low and began to weep dramatically. Then he said, "God bless you. You have given me such virtuous advice. I, too, have been feeling remorseful and anxious."

He sent for his servants and issued orders, "Take forty trays of food and sherbets to the family of Husain Ibn Ali without delay."

But they said, "How can we show our faces to them, we are ashamed. We have slit the throats of their near and dear ones in front of their very eyes. They will not touch the food we give them. We feel nauseated placing even a morsel of food in our own mouths with these filthy, blood-stained hands."

Ibn Sa'ad said to Shimr, "Well brother, at this time, you are the only one who can go to them. You are related to Abbas Ibn Ali."

"No, no, I won't be able to do this. Zainab saw me with her own eyes when I climbed on Husain's chest and slaughtered him."

"And, you wretch, why did you have to slap the little girl and pull off her earrings—you are right, it is not appropriate for you to go. If she sees you she will die from fright." Ibn Sa'ad looked worried.

Finally, when no one came forward to take the food, he remembered Hurr's wife, who was travelling with the Syrian army. The poor woman was in deep mourning for her husband. She was comforted by the thought that God had blessed Hurr with the power to see everything clearly at the right moment, that her brave husband had sacrificed his life for the truth and was at least able to atone for some of his sins.

Ibn Sa'ad sent for her. The unfortunate woman thought that she was about to receive punishment for Hurr's betrayal. She was trembling with fear when she arrived, but when she heard that she was to take food for the Imam's family, she was relieved. She had already been thinking about the anguish and misery of the beleaguered ones and was glad for the opportunity to serve them. When she saw them from a distance her heart broke looking at the state they were in. Women and children lay on the sand, without any shelter, lacking the basic necessities of life. She came back immediately and said, "May God curse you, Ibn Sa'ad! The women of the Prophet's family are sitting without their chadars on the sand in the open. First, have tents pitched for them and then I will take the food. How will the food go down their gullet if they are sitting on the sand with defiled corpses piled up nearby?"

Ibn Sa'ad was confused and apprehensive. He quickly gave the order that a large tent be pitched for them.

When Zainab heard the sound of footsteps and saw the light of torches approaching she sat up with a start. She

thought the tyrants were not going to leave them alone here too, and that they were coming to inflict more pain on them. She immediately stood up and advancing towards them, she said, "Are we running away? In God's name, please leave us alone. The children have just fallen asleep. If they wake up they will start crying again from hunger and thirst. They are agitated and their energy is sapped."

Hearing this, Hurr's wife burst into tears and wept bitterly. Then, coming forward, she said, "I have come to you with a request."

"A request? We are sitting here waiting for orders."

"Come and rest in that tent."

"Rest? Is there any rest left for us?"

"Bibi, I am your slave, Hurr's widow."

"God bless Hurr. Sister, why did you not say so earlier? How grand was the manner in which your husband proved his love for the Imam. God knows, every ounce of our being is grateful to him."

"It is I who is grateful that the Imam showed him the right way and he has found a good place in the afterlife. He was blessed with martyrdom. But alas, Bibi, it is not my place to offer condolences for the Imam. I am your slave."

She led them to the tent. A short while later, the trays of food arrived. Everyone trembled with fear. Perhaps the heads of the martyred were being brought to inflict further pain on them. But when the platters were uncovered, they breathed a sigh of relief.

"What is this?" Zainab asked coldly.

"It is the offering of food given in the name of the dead."

"Oh God, this is *haziree*! My dear loved ones had been hungry and thirsty for three days when they were slaughtered, and now, what is this cruel twist of fate that we

are being offered food in their name. These are all tactics to cause us more pain. What haziree, sister? Their bodies are still lying without a shroud and a grave. The haziree is served after a loved one is buried. Has the Arab nation changed the commands of God and the Prophet? Take these trays away, we will not touch this food."

At this moment, Ibn Husain felt that it was necessary to perform his duty.

"You have accepted me as your Imam."

"Yes, my son, the truth is that after my brother, you are our Imam."

"Then, as the Imam, I pronounce that in the battlefield all restrictions dictated by custom and tradition, and rules and regulations cease to exist."

Zainab looked at the sick and feeble Imam. She felt encouraged. Her anxiety diminished. She said, "Then recite the Sura Fatiha* over these trays, my son."

The Imam recited the Sura Fatiha. The children were woken up one by one and given water to drink, slowly, drop by drop, so that they wouldn't choke and die. Their throats were constricted due to dryness resulting from a prolonged lack of water. Gradually, their throats were moistened and, finally, they were able to take proper gulps. When Sakina was given water, she clapped joyfully.

"Chacha Jaan did bring water, didn't he? I said he would. The enemy doesn't have the courage to stop my uncle."

Zainab stood silently with the bowl of water in her hand.

"But I will only take a drink from Chacha Jaan's hands."

* Sura Fatiha is the opening verse of the Qur'an, recited during prayers and on various occasions.

Zainab's hands shook and the water splashed over.

"My dear daughter, won't you drink from my hands?" said Ibn Husain, leaning over his sister.

"I will drink, but first tell me where are Baba Jaan and Chacha Jaan. I will complain to them about the man who pulled my ears and hit me."

With great difficulty everyone ate a few mouthfuls of food and took a gulp or two of water. It seemed as if their throats had forgotten the act of swallowing.

"Bhai," Sakina said after a few moments.

"Yes, Bibi."

"It is best you don't tell Chacha Jaan I was slapped and my ears were pulled. He is short-tempered, and if he gets angry it will be terrible. The battle will start again."

These last three days of starvation and lack of water had left them emaciated, their skin was peeling, their limbs were aching to the bone. The children finally fell asleep, but the mothers tossed and turned endlessly, lamenting and sobbing.

Zainab's eyes burned like live coals. She had not shed a single tear for her brother. A few feet away from the tent lay the bodies of her dear ones with no shroud, without a burial. The Imam had ripped everyone's garments before they left for the battlefield as he believed that no one would be interested in pulling off their already tattered clothing and that way perhaps their bodies would be spared from being exposed. But bestiality has no eyes. "No, there is no time to weep. The battle is not over yet, only the circumstances have changed. There are many more hurdles to overcome, a great deal more is yet to be inflicted upon us."

As the night advanced everyone dozed off.

Suddenly, Umme Rubab noticed with a start that Sakina was not lying next to her. Perhaps she had gone to her Phupi Zainab. When she saw that the little girl was not with her either, she started looking around frantically for her. She did not call out for the fear of waking up the others. Day was breaking, the candles were sputtering. Her apprehensions grew. Oh, where was the child? She got up again, her heart pounding. Had she slipped out?

She quietly shook Zainab's shoulder.

"Bibi, I cannot find Sakina."

"She will be here somewhere."

"She is not here. Maybe she wandered out in her sleep."

The two women tiptoed outside. They looked in the vicinity of the tent but didn't see anyone. Where was she? Oh God, had she been captured by some animal?

They were relieved when in the light of dawn they spotted tiny footprints in the sand. They followed them. The morning light had not fully broken yet. There was no guard around so they could not make any inquiries. Exhausted, everyone was sleeping soundly, dead to the world.

Far away in the distance, they saw something move. They ran towards it. Sakina was lying on the chest of her father's crushed, headless corpse, fast asleep. She must have walked there in her sleep.

Umme Rubab held back her screams with great difficulty and leaned over to pick up the child.

"No, I will sleep with Baba," the little girl murmured.

"No, my princess," Zainab said gently and picked her up. She realised Sakina was burning with a fever.

"Baba is sleeping soundly, I didn't wake him. I put my head on his chest and lay down quietly..." The little girl was

muttering feverishly, "Phupi Jaan, Baba is freezing... he's as cold as ice... cover him up with a blanket, please..."

Zainab didn't answer. Supporting Umme Rubab and Sakina in her arms, she walked on silently. Umme Rubab was unsteady, she stumbled at every step.

"Baba didn't hug me, is he angry with me?"

Umme Rubab could not control herself any longer. She let out a muffled cry. Within seconds, a few guards leapt towards them and placed their lances on their chests. One of them held up a torch.

"You are trying to escape, aren't you?"

Zainab pushed the bayonets aside with her hand.

"The little girl walked out in her sleep. She is used to sleeping on her father's chest. Don't worry, no one is escaping from your clutches."

The guards hesitated, then pulled back.

By the time they got back to their tent everyone was waking up. The children had started crying again. Kubra was tormented by the gash on her palm. The lacerations from her smashed wedding bangles had dried up, but the wound in her heart was still fresh.

Imam Husain had never hidden anything from them nor had he ever misled them with made-up excuses. Ibn Husain, too, answered their questions with brutal honesty. Those who are gone are gone forever and will never return. The children listened to him with their eyes wide open, as if they understood everything. But after a short while they again started insisting, "Let's go to Baba."

"Send for Abbas Chacha."

"Where is Akbar Bhai?"

"How long will Aun and Muhammad play outside? We will also join them."

"When will Qasim Bhai return? Kubra Baji weeps all the time."

The children's remarks only deepened the feelings of anguish and pain.

The morning of the eleventh of Muharram brought new ordeals in its wake.

Ibn Sa'ad organised a meeting to discuss the behaviour of some of the commanders the previous night, which was rebellious to the extent of being inappropriate. If these germs were not destroyed in time they would soon cause a plague. It is essential to keep a close watch on those who have such rebellious ideas. It would be prudent to resolve this problem once and for all when they were back in Kufa. These words of sympathy could easily turn into an extended disturbance.

A few things, however, had already been taken care of on the previous night. The most vocal and zealous commanders had been removed. A few more dead bodies among the hundreds that were anyway piled up in the battlefield would not raise any suspicions. As for the others who had proven to be untrustworthy, informers were appointed to keep an eye on them.

While the corpses of the Syrians were buried with care, those of the members of the Prophet's family were left unattended in the scorching heat. It was announced that no one was allowed to bury them and anyone found disobeying these orders would suffer a punishment worse than death. There would be no mercy shown under any circumstances since it could be misunderstood. Feelings of regret and atonement spread like the plague.

It was extremely critical to establish, by ill means or fair, that Husain Ibn Ali was a traitor. He had refused to pledge his allegiance to Yazid, the rightful heir to the Prophet of Islam appointed by God. Driven by his greed for power and territorial gains, Husain had built an army and was intent on bloodshed. A battle ensued and he was defeated.

Shimr said, "Imam Husain was not the only member of the Prophet of God's family. The Prophet was also related to Yazid, who is virtuous, courageous, upright and abstinent, because he has been specially blessed by God. The majority of the Arab nation is with him."

At this point, it was necessary to prove that the Prophet's grandsons could also make mistakes and that they, too, could be punished in order to protect Islam. They were not Allah's chosen ones or else He would have saved them. The rightful Caliph of the Muslims, the one who is dear to God is Yazid, who has been showered with the blessings of both worlds.

But what if the idea is instilled in the minds of a handful of troublemakers that Husain is innocent, that he did not raise an army, he had only seventy-two relatives and friends with him in battlefield, that he had the right to decide whether to give the oath of allegiance or not because allegiance is pledged on the basis of faith and belief, that after completely disregarding all the rules of Islam, and depriving him and his people of water and food for three days, he had been besieged by an army of thousands and martyred?

Such ideas had to be nipped in the bud. People who harboured these feelings must be treated as the enemies of Islam. Some people suggested that it was not practical to be burdened with the captives and that it would be disastrous to journey with them to Syria. Finish them off right here and be done with this problem. No need to take them to Kufa.

But after careful deliberation, the council came to the conclusion that if Imam Husain's people were killed here, the captors would lose the valuable opportunity of making a spectacle of the prisoners before the people to strike fear into their hearts. An army returning from the battlefield with nothing to show does not make an impression. If there were no spoils of the war then at least there should be captives. When people see the suffering and humiliation of the prisoners, they will cease to have any respect for them. No one will believe that because the Imam was the grandson of the Prophet, he and his family were entitled to a special status. The more the captives are disgraced and humiliated, the greater will be the regard for Yazid in people's hearts. The grander the pageant, the more successful it will be.

Manacles were placed around Ibn Husain's neck and ankles. Shimr was very disheartened. What a deathly prisoner he was, with spindly legs and thin neck—the manacles will not have the desired effect, will they? If broad shouldered, muscular warriors are chained in fetters then the victor's triumph is multiplied. This ailing, emaciated prisoner, the frail and wasted children, and sorrowing, shrunken women burned by the sun—they will make their captors look like persecutors.

Their head uncovered, the women sat on the camels without their children. There were ropes fastened around their necks. The children's necks were tied with a long rope, their heads strung like beads in a rosary. Along with that, for display, there was the blood-drenched standard, the burnt tents, and Ali Asghar's charred cradle. Leading the procession were the heads of the martyrs fixed on lances. Every single head was valuable. Even as the battle had been ongoing, there was a frantic search for Ali Asghar's head. A

small mound of soft earth was spotted. The grave was dug up and the dead infant's head was at once severed from his remains and mounted on a lance.

As they were about to depart, Zainab tried to run frantically towards the bodies of her loved ones. She had taken only two steps when the rope got caught against her neck and chafed her skin. The soldiers yanked the rope and she fell on the ground in a faint. After this incident, every time the captives saw the bodies of the martyrs, they merely glanced despondently at them and then lowered their heads.

"If you die, Zainab, then my sacrifice will be in vain. Public memory is short-lived and in two or three years everyone will forget. My blood will be lost in the sands of Karbala," the Imam had said to his sister.

This will never happen. Every breath I take will cry out 'Husain, Husain!' Every drop of his blood will be accounted for, Zainab had decided.

Ibn Husain had also memorised his aunt's words. The sick man who, until yesterday, didn't even have the strength to turn on his side, strode forward forcefully in spite of the heavy burden of shackles and fetters. In his hands were the reins of the camels on which the mothers and daughters of his family were seated with their heads uncovered. The fever of the body had cooled down in the face of the fire burning in his soul. He stumbled at every step, his head was swimming, darkness came before his eyes repeatedly, but his spirit and resolve were firm. The desire to live strengthened his sense of purpose. Whatever the circumstances, he was going to live, he had to face whatever fate had in store for them all.

In Kufa, there was a complete ban on news. The authorities had not allowed any information pertaining to the events at Karbala to reach the ears of ordinary citizens.

All preparations for the arrival of the convoy had been completed. The envoys had already given the governor of Kufa the news of the arrival of the procession led by the victors. The only report circulating in the city was that a handful of rebels had revolted against the reigning Caliph and they had been crushed. Now the criminals, bound up in chains, were being brought to Kufa in order to create an entertaining spectacle. On hearing the news of the victorious army's entry into Kufa, the governor, Ibn Ziyad, issued orders to decorate the entire city with mirrors. Bright lights illuminated every part of town, groups of singers and female dancers gathered to perform at every street corner and square, the air echoed with the sounds of merrymaking and festivities.

Fearful of Ibn Ziyad's wrath, the people of Kufa fully participated in the celebrations. Afraid that when they were faced with the reality of the situation people might rise up in protest, the governor ordered a ban on carrying weapons.

The following day, when Ibn Sa'ad entered the city with great pomp and show, with his entire army in tow, everyone rejoiced in their triumph. People came out in throngs to witness the spectacle. The captives were in such a bad state that even their own relatives would not have been able to recognise them. The heads mounted on the lances were covered in blood and dust. Not for one moment could anyone have imagined that all this fanfare was in celebration of the killing of Husain, that these captives were the family and the near and dear ones of the Prophet of God. Everyone presumed they were some wild tribal rebels. Their complexion was blackened by the sun, their skin scorched in the heat, they were all skin and bones, their heads lowered as they suffered the torment of captivity. As

was the custom, the spectators threw bricks, stones, and waste at the prisoners and cursed and swore at them. A man saw Ibn Husain stumble and he roared with laughter.

“O enemy of Islam, may God curse you!”

“O dear man, do you know who I am?”

“Yes, I know, you are the enemy of Islam.”

“You have been fooled. How can I be the enemy of the faith that my glorious ancestor established? I am Ibn Husain. There, before you, on the lance is the head of my father. Do you recognise Husain Ibn Ali?”

An older man peered closely and suddenly he looked as if he had been struck by lightning.

“Oh God, Husain Ibn Ali has been slain,” the man started screaming.

The news spread like wildfire through the crowd. People gaped wide-eyed at the heads on the lances, and recognising them, started pulling their hair and beating their heads.

A commotion broke out. People tried to attack the soldiers and take away the heads. But Ibn Ziyad’s army was already prepared for such a reaction. Crushing the crowds, the cavalry rushed forward and surrounded the lances, even as there was an attempt to hastily transport the captives to the governor’s fortress. The celebration had turned into a mourning for Husain; sounds of weeping and lamentation were heard from every home.

“O God! Husain Ibn Ali has been slayed.”

This news spread in every direction. At first, the people of Kufa were in deep shock. Then, a heart-rending scream came from the hearts of thousands, making the entire city tremble. People lamented as if they had gone mad. They pulled out their hair, ripped their clothes.

At this point, Zainab Bint Ali lifted the veil of tangled hair from her face and addressed the people of Kufa, "O people of Kufa, you are wicked and you are liars. You break promises, you are despicable. You made great promises and broke them. You deceived my brother, Imam Husain Ibn Ali. You forced him in exile and when he was coming here at your behest, you protected your own lives like cowardly jackals and went into hiding, leaving him at the mercy of ruthless beasts. He was deprived of water, starved and then slaughtered. We have been ruined. Now you are shedding crocodile tears for us? I pray to God that these tears stream from your eyes forever. Dishonourable people! The blot with which you have stained your garment will not be washed out until doomsday. You have betrayed the man who was both your earthly leader and spiritual guide. God will never forgive your sins. The world will never forgive your deceptions and treachery. O merciless people, you slaughtered the innocent grandson of the Prophet, you killed his hungry and thirsty baby, you beat his young children, you pulled off the chadars of the women of his family and insulted them, and now you are weeping?"

The people of Kufa were overcome with terror when they heard the words of Zainab Bint Ali. Their eyes bulged out of their sockets, they banged their heads against the walls, tore off their garments and pulled at their hair.

Seeing the situation deteriorating, Omar Sa'ad tried to move the captives quickly through the crowd, pushing people aside with the help of swords and spears. But the crowd had become unmanageable. After a great deal of bloodshed, the army was able to overpower the people and finally made its way towards the fortress. Along the way, there were many who walked alongside the procession, wailing and lamenting.

The city that only a short while ago had been decked up like a bride turned into a place of mourning. Sounds of lamentation came from every house. No one had ever heard of such a horrifying event as this. Murder, and that too of the family of the Prophet, carried out so brutally!

With great difficulty the procession finally arrived at the court of Ibn Ziyad.

Kholi and Bashir Ibn Maalik took the head of the defeated Imam and entered the court reciting with great fervour:

“Shower us with gold and silver,
Fill our pockets with gems,
Because we bring the head of such a great emperor,
Who was the beloved grandson of the Prophet of God,
And was by all accounts a noble and superior man...”

“You wretched creatures, if you consider Husain a superior individual then why did you kill him?” Ibn Ziyad said angrily. “I am tempted to behead you for this.”

Bashir Ibn Maalik flinched. He felt that Ibn Ziyad's intentions were no longer honourable. No doubt he was going to take away a share from the rewards that were promised by Yazid's court. Maalik slipped away quietly. But that same night he was killed by an unknown assailant.

Ibn Ziyad sent the captives to a prison adjacent to the mosque. This was the same Kufa where twenty years ago, Ali Ibn Abi Talib had governed. He had worked tirelessly to improve the city. He trusted the Kufans. There was a day when Zainab and Umme Kulsoom had lived here like princesses. Women from the families of the rich and elite in the city had regarded it a special honour to be in their presence. Today, even those women who did not have a special status were reluctant to go near them because

they felt if anyone came to know, they would lose the governor's favours.

The conditions in Kufa were worsening. A few daring men had tried to remove the heads mounted on the lances. Hiding in corners here and there, people made efforts to find out more about the events at Karbala, and upon learning the details hit their heads in anguish. A storm of hatred and anger rose against Ibn Ziyad, which was ruthlessly suppressed. After all, how could unarmed men fight armed soldiers? While outwardly they remained silent, on the inside they were burning with anger. They began congregating in secret, sometimes blaming others and sometimes cursing themselves for what had happened. In short, Husain's bloodshed began to have an effect.

Wishing to get rid of the ongoing unrest among the people in his city, Ibn Ziyad decided that he would simply kill all the captives and put an end to the problem once and for all. But that same day he received royal orders from Damascus instructing him to send off all the heads and the captives to the capital. Shimr Ziljaushan began the journey, leading the procession along with other senior commanders.

It was decided that they would travel through the most densely populated settlements so that people learnt the lesson that if they rebelled against Yazid this is what they would have to endure. The Kufans had created a turmoil in the beginning, but eventually, as always, they made a quiet retreat. Shimr presumed that since this strategy had worked and the uprising in Kufa had been successfully suppressed, the same tactics would work in other cities as well. No one would dare to defy Yazid again. When the Prophet's grandson, who had stood upto Yazid, could be destroyed, then who else would have the courage to doubt his supremacy?

Arrangements were made in advance by sending out messengers to all the cities the caravan was passing through. The towns were to be decked up, there should be arrangements for musical festivities and merrymaking. The procession should be welcomed with grand victory celebrations as it advanced from one place to another.

But Shimr's far-sightedness proved to be his greatest folly. Wherever the caravan went it roused those who had so far been passive. The path it travelled was lit up with blazing passions. Instead of creating feelings of awe for Yazid in their hearts, the procession ended up convincing the people of Husain Ibn Ali's courage and valour. He had sacrificed his head but did not bow at Yazid's feet. He gave up his life but did not sell his conscience, he did not betray his principles. He was impervious to any kind of greed or threat, he suffered such tyranny and torments, but his steps did not faltered even for a moment.

Husain's extraordinary spirit continued to find a place in people's hearts. Citizens came out in large numbers along the route of the procession. News travelled through secret channels along with the official reports, and at every stop, Zainab's legacy of eloquence and erudition continued to leave an indelible mark. When people gathered to see them, she narrated the details of the martyrdom of either a son or a nephew, in a manner so sorrowful that even stones melted. The soldiers resorted to violence to disperse the crowds. Guards accompanied the prisoners so that Zainab could be stopped from speaking. But she always managed to make a statement here and there that broke people's hearts.

Once, the ropes holding Ali Asghar's cradle became loose and it fell down from the camel's back. Umme Rubab could not control her screams.

"Hai! My baby, my beloved child has fallen. People, please hold Ali Asghar's cradle."

Zainab clasped her sister-in-law to her bosom and said, "Do not weep, my queen, the cradle is empty. Your beloved child must be asleep in the lap of his grandmother, Fatima Zehra. He left us a long time ago. The tyrant's three-headed arrow pierced his little neck. That was when the Imam had smeared his son's warm, fresh blood on his face. Do not weep, my princess, the cradle is empty, your lap is also bare."

Then she turned towards the crowd and said, "O fortunate mothers, you who have living, cooing infants in your laps, nursing at your breasts, be grateful to God that your wombs are blessed, for Umme Rubab's lap, like this cradle, is now empty forever."

Despite the use of extensive physical force, the soldiers were unable to stop the women from touching their eyes to the fallen cradle, from kissing the strings attached to it.

Disturbances occurred in every city they passed. The dance and music assemblies were set on fire, and the streets resounded with the sounds of lamentation for Imam Husain. Eventually, the caravan completely bypassed some of the towns. Ever since people had tried to seize the severed heads, they had been stored in boxes. If all the heads were not handed over safe and sound there would be trouble. After listening to the accounts of the events at Karbala people became inflamed, they felt encouraged to stand up to their governor and rebel against the brutality they had been subjected to. The tongues of those who had suffered were finally loosened. The Imam had shown them the righteous way of living—by dying. He had had his head severed so that they could lift their heads up in

defiance. This fire spread from one city to the next, people started organising themselves in groups. The more they were suppressed through violent means, the more defiant they became.

Shimr Ziljaushan felt helpless. In city after city he either had to face silence or profanities from the people instead of chants of admiration and felicitations.

The regime that treated Muslims in this manner had treated Christians and Jews worse than animals. All their rights had been taken away gradually. So, at this time, they also sided with those mourning Husain. As a result, they were mercilessly slain. But the blood of Husain had roused people's passions. The more harshly they were treated, the more their hatred and anger grew, and, in the end, there remained no doubt in their minds that their leadership was in the hands of inhuman, tyrannical and godless individuals.

By martyring the Imam, Yazid had not only dug his own grave but also undermined his authority. By the time the caravan reached Damascus, thousands of Yazid's followers had turned against him.

The caravan forged ahead.

At every stop, the soldiers would excessively indulge in feasting and revelry while the captives were left alone. People would get to them stealthily, listen to Zainab and Umme Kulsoom relate the events of Karbala and weep silently.

“We have been fated to stay alive while the bodies of our near and dear ones lie in Karbala without shrouds, without graves, at the mercy of wild animals.”

Zainab would gaze at the heads mounted on the lances with feverish eyes.

"Look, look at how my brother's tears flow. The tyrants snatched our chadars and forced us to travel from place to place with our heads uncovered. My brother's spirit is restless."

People heard their accounts, then gathered their friends and relatives and related the stories to them, wept, beat their chests and hit their heads in anguish over their inability to take any action.

Shireen's Palace

When Husain Ibn Ali got married to the Iranian princess, Shehr Bano, there was among her female servants a favourite whose name was Shireen. Although she was a slave, she lived with Shehr Bano like a younger sister. They both loved each other dearly.

Shireen was very beautiful and well-mannered and Bano showered her with great affection. After marriage, she freed all her female slaves and arranged their marriages, but she kept Shireen by her side.

One day, Husain was talking to his beloved wife, both were conversing affectionately with each other. Bano was glowing with joy. They loved each other deeply. Bano was, by God's grace, the mother of a child now, but her love for her husband had not diminished even a little. At this time, Shireen appeared with some fruit and juices and the Imam happened to notice her. He looked at her closely, and when she left he said to Bano, "Her eyes are beautiful. By God, I have not seen such eyes before."

Bano's heart stopped for a moment. She thought that his praise for Shireen's eyes was a sign of what was in his heart. A woman is man's weakness and a woman as beautiful as Shireen could attract any man.

Her head lowered, her entire being still, she fell into deep thought.

You love your master, so his happiness is your happiness. No doubt Shireen also loves Husain. After all, hearts with the same passions are bound together.

“What are you thinking?” Husain asked her tenderly, touching her chin.

“I am thinking about you, what else can I be thinking of?” Bano said, holding back her tears with difficulty. She imagined that in the love reflecting in Husain’s eyes there was Shireen’s share as well. She said, “Please stay here, don’t go anywhere. I will be back soon.”

She went outside and summoned Shireen. When she came, Bano took her to her room and quickly dressed her up in silk garments embellished with gold thread, arranged her hair, sprinkled musk and amber attar over her body and applied kohl in her eyes.

Shireen submitted to this with astonishment and then when she was ready, she asked, “Bano, what is this? Why are you adorning me?”

“For Husain.”

“God forgive me! What are you saying?”

“You accept, don’t you?”

“Accept? I am proud to be the mat under his feet, what higher status than that can I have? Bano, please don’t put the burden of sin on me. My dearest, I will give my life for you, but what is this silliness?”

“Shireen, you know how dear you are to me. I freed all the female slaves but I couldn’t bear the thought of parting with you. You know you are not my servant, you are like my sister, even more than a sister.”

“Yes, I know. Did I ever complain that you haven’t set me free? Bano, why would anyone chained to your love ever want to be freed.”

"You are my childhood friend. There is no secret of mine that is hidden from you. So today, I will share another secret with you—that my Husain likes you, your fate has been adorned. Until today, I was the queen, but from now on you will have the status of a princess, and the queen of my master's heart will become my queen."

"Oh God, what has happened to you? I don't understand anything. I am your slave and wish to die as your slave. What is this strange idea that has invaded your head? My master adores you and you love him passionately, praise be to God. Anyone who comes between two loving hearts is a sinner."

"Shireen, I can't argue with you. This is a matter of the heart. Husain is the master of my heart and my life, if he is happy, then my heart, which he inhabits, will be happy, too. You are inexperienced, Shireen. When you love someone you will realise that a beloved's happiness becomes one's own happiness."

After overwhelming her with arguments, she took Shireen to her own room.

Then she went to Husain. "Please come with me, I want to tell you something."

Husain observed the dispirited expression on Bano's face and immediately realised that something had upset her. Perhaps she was angry because he had praised Shireen's eyes. Now she will complain and protest, he thought, and smiling he followed her. When he lifted the curtain of their room he was dumbfounded. Shireen was sitting on the bed in a bridal dress, her head bowed. He immediately grasped the situation and burst out laughing.

"You amaze me. A few words of praise for her eyes and God knows what ideas filled your head. By God, in the

presence of a beloved such as you I do not need anyone else. Tell me, do you doubt my intentions?"

"God forbid! But I am giving her to you willingly and happily."

"All right, I will have to accept your gift. But I free her now."

Bano looked tearfully at Husain's smiling face and lowered her eyes.

That same evening Husain arranged Shireen's wedding with a Jewish friend whom Shireen liked very much. He was a wealthy merchant and had a large castle that was built atop a hill.

Bano gave Shireen a magnificent dowry. She kissed her face repeatedly, smiling joyfully at the thought of her happiness, and also weeping at her departure. Husain laughed and said, "You did not give any of the other servants such a grand dowry, you are being very generous to her."

"While I freed the others it is you who has freed her. That is why she is a princess among princesses."

"This reasoning is beyond my understanding," Husain said, laughing.

Just like an honourable daughter of the house, Shireen's departure was preceded by festivities and a grand feast. When she was leaving, she embraced everyone and wept, held the children to her bosom and kissed them, gathered Bano in her arms and blessed her many times.

Seeing her cry, Husain asked jokingly, "Don't you want to go?"

"This is my maternal home, Master, who would want to leave their house? I will miss all of you very much."

"When you miss us come back for a visit, and Bano, we must promise to visit Shireen. If life permits, we will certainly come to your house once, Shireen."

"You will bring all the children with you?"

"Yes, we will bring them, I promise."

Shireen left with her bridegroom but she never forgot Husain and Bano. She wrote to them often asking when they would grace her abode with their presence, saying that she was anxiously waiting to see them.

Husain had said to Bano, "Write to the blessed girl that I never break my promise. Say yes, we will come to her house one day."

And the day of which Imam Husain had spoken finally arrived.

Shireen had heard a rumour that Imam Husain was travelling to Kufa along with his family. Then she heard that he had changed his route. The actual facts about Karbala were not known to anyone, but there was some recent news that perhaps the Imam was journeying this way.

Shireen asked passersby if there was any caravan heading towards this direction in the hope that it might be of Imam Husain. Perhaps her honourable guests would finally visit her. She then heard that Imam Husain was travelling with his family to Damascus for a meeting with Yazid, accompanied by the army, in which case he would definitely pass this way.

Upon hearing that the army had arrived, Shireen immediately began making arrangements. She decked up her house with new furniture and decorations. She invited her neighbours and talked at length about the Imam and his entire family. Her neighbours were filled with envy. The Prophet of God's grandson was about to visit Shireen's house as a guest. Her status was indeed exalted. Those who had not had the honour of seeing Rasulullah were eager to catch a glimpse of his grandson. "Only those who

are fortunate have the honour of seeing the family of the Prophet of God. O, Sister, don't forget us on the happy occasion," they said.

Shireen laughed proudly and said, "Don't worry, how can I forget you? Once my Master is here you will certainly have the opportunity to pay your respects. By God's grace, he has a large family. People say Ali Akbar is the Prophet's look-alike, those who see him praise him and then praise the Prophet. And what can one say about Abbas Ibn Ali? There is no one as good-looking as him in all of Arabia. He is known as the Moon of the Quraish. The Imam's sister and her children will also be accompanying them. Anyone who hasn't seen Fatima Zehra just has to see Zainab Bint Ali. She is an exact image of her mother."

When Shireen heard the news of the arrival of the procession she went mad with joy. She couldn't sleep. She supervised the preparation of many different kinds of dishes, made sherbets, sent out an invitation to her entire neighbourhood. Then she said to her husband, "Please go and wait at the city gates. The moment you spot Zuljanah, take hold of the reins immediately. People will rush to offer them their hospitality, but make sure you get everyone out of the way. Bring them here first. I don't want anyone to invite them before we do. No, wait, take me with you too, I will bring them straight here."

"Dear girl, why are you so nervous?" her husband said, laughing. "There is no need for you to go just yet. Let me first go and see if they are here yet. I will send for you once they reach so that we can both be there to welcome them."

Her husband left. When he returned, he looked sad and disappointed.

"It isn't your Master, it is Yazid's army. Some rebels revolted and were defeated and now they have been brought along as captives. There are severed heads mounted on lances. The women and children are not in palanquins, they are tied to the backs of camels. They are in a dreadful state. I felt so sorry for them that I couldn't bear to stay and came away immediately."

Disheartened, Shireen started crying. She was not fated to meet her Master, she thought. She didn't eat. The elaborate feast she had prepared remained untouched.

That night the caravan set up camp in the field across from her palace. A lively atmosphere prevailed. The captives had been abandoned in a separate corner and the lances with the severed heads had been fixed onto the ground. Loud sounds of carousing and revelry emanated from the commander's tent. Alcohol was in abundance. Whole goats were being grilled on live coals. The captives had been given small portions of dried grains of wheat along with some water, which they swallowed with difficulty.

"My beloved uncle will come soon and I will drink the water he brings," Sakina insisted. "Amma, first give Ali Asghar water to drink, he has been thirsty for so many days. How can I take a drink when my younger brother is thirsty?"

"Just swallow a mouthful my child, for my sake," her aunt coaxed her. "Your brother's and Baba's thirst has already been quenched by Allah."

Shireen's silken bed felt like a bed of thorns. She tossed and turned. She could hear the sounds of sobs and moans

along with the strains of the harp and lute. She got up with a start. Her heart was sinking. When she could no longer contain herself, she thought: *Why don't I go and see for myself who these miserable people are who are lamenting like this. No one knows whether they are actually guilty or if they have been caught in a web of deceit. The world is such a strange and unpredictable place, often it is the innocent who are punished while the evil-doers go completely scotfree...*

There was so much food in the house, she shouldn't waste it, she thought. If the commander gave her permission, she would feed the unfortunate captives. She threw a chadar over herself and left the house. The place where the captives were kept was pitchdark. She made her way with uncertainty as she walked forward. The sight of the heads on the lances made her tremble violently. Alarmed, she halted in front of one.

She stared intently, her gaze fixed on Imam Husain's head covered in blood and dust. Surely her eyes were deceiving her, she had been constantly thinking about him these last few days and now she was seeing his face. Suddenly, Bano spotted Shireen. She recognised her immediately and doubling over in shame and humiliation, hid her face in her hair.

Shireen's body shook violently, muffled screams escaped from her mouth, she couldn't believe her eyes. But Husain's face was etched in her mind. She had seen his luminous face many times in her dreams. But what was this horrifying dream? What was the sin for which she was being punished by having to see the bloodied head before her? Shocked, she turned her gaze towards the group of captives huddled in a corner. At that moment, Bano wished that the earth would swallow her.

Shireen's suspicions turned to certainty. Filled with anxiety and trepidation she slowly approached Bano, bent

down, moved her hair away from her face, and then fell down at her feet with a scream.

“My princess, what is this that these wretched eyes see. Oh God, take away my sight, what is this I see...”

A wave of anguish swept through the captives. Shireen embraced everyone and wept uncontrollably. Her husband, looking for her, also arrived there. Sobbing hysterically, Shireen told him everything and pleaded with him to go and ask the commander for permission to take the prisoners to their palace.

“Why would that wretch give me permission?”

“Permission can be bought, give him whatever he wants, jewels, gold, silver, anything. Let's take them away for a short while.”

Shireen's husband went to Shimr Ziljaushan and opened up bags of riches before him. At first he didn't agree, then he decided it would be foolish to turn down all this money. What was the harm anyway, the palace was surrounded by the army, there was no likelihood of deception or trickery. Shireen took off all her jewellery and placed it before him.

She and her husband even brought the heads on the lances along with them. At the palace, she provided every comfort for her guests. With her own hands, she washed their bruised feet with rose attar and bandaged them, applied heat to their swollen limbs, and rubbed ointment on their abrasions. She presented them with clean, new silken garments, but Zainab refused to remove the clothes she was wearing.

“Those who have departed have left behind only these blood stains as a remembrance. We do not want to separate them from our bodies.”

Shireen also purified the heads of the martyrs with rose attar, and then wrapping them in silk and brocade blankets

she placed them reverentially on a couch. Everyone gathered around and Zainab Bint Ali recounted the events of Karbala in her grief-stricken voice. Shireen and her neighbours heard the account and then their mourning and lamentations woke up those in the area who had been asleep. Slowly, a crowd gathered in the palace's courtyard and their loud cries, filled with sorrow and grief, roused the inebriated commanders from their stupor. They were alarmed when they saw the grief and rage of the people.

Shireen begged and pleaded with them, but the tyrants ruthlessly dispersed the crowd and took the captives away without allowing them to have a proper meal. The heads were smeared with dust and blood once again and put back in boxes. Orders were at once issued to resume the journey. Shireen and her husband wept as they walked with the caravan until they were forced to turn back.

The caravan advanced towards Damascus leaving a storm of rage and anguish in its wake in every town. People were consumed with the events of Karbala and could neither sleep at night nor have peace during the day. Businesses suffered, citizens gathered at street corners and repeated the stories of Karbala, expressed their anger and sorrow, shared with each other what they had heard from the captives, and were overcome by fearful thoughts about the future. Feelings of hatred and loathing for Yazid, his commanders and his soldiers, intensified with each passing day.

No other nation in the world had treated its Prophet's descendants in this merciless and inhuman manner.

The Court

Shimr Ziljaushan made elaborate preparations before he started for Damascus. Since conditions in many cities had been extremely unfavourable, he had to be very strict in order to maintain discipline. But he was certain that in the capital, where the Caliph was favoured and also feared, people would not dare to show any resistance and the victorious army would be welcomed with great pomp and show.

Making a stop not too far from the walls of the city, he assessed his army, re-shuffled the ranks, took the heads out of the boxes and mounted them back on the lances.

Zainab Bint Ali said to Shimr Ziljaushan, "We will be grateful if you place the heads of the martyrs some distance away from us so that people do not stare at us in their excitement of seeing them."

But how could Shimr let go of such a golden opportunity. He was determined to disgrace the captives as much as he possibly could. Driven by his stubborn nature, he took the procession through the gate where the crowds were the largest. When the procession neared a mosque, a Syrian thought that kafirs were being brought in as captives. He loudly began chanting slogans in Shimr's praise.

"O Shimr Ziljaushan, may blessings rain upon you, you destroyed the enemies of Islam and rooted out evil and insurgency!"

Zainul Abidin cast a tired and weak glance at the spectators around him and asked this man, "Do you believe in God?"

"Of course," the man replied.

"And do you believe in his Prophet?"

"Not I alone, but my parents, too, and we can lay down our lives for him."

"And what do you think about the Prophet's family?"

"Praise be to Allah, the members of the Prophet's family are the divine source of beneficence and mercy," he said passionately.

"Then look closely and recognise the head drenched in blood and covered in dust. This is the head of the Prophet's grandson, Imam Husain Ibn Ali. Alongside him are the severed heads of his nephews and sons. I, Zainul Abidin, am the ill-fated and sick son of the oppressed and wronged Imam, and these women you see sitting on the backs of camels, their chadars snatched from their heads, are the daughters-in-law, daughters, and the granddaughters of the Prophet of God."

Hearing this, the man was stunned into silence. Then he screamed, "This is a lie."

An old man came forward and said, "I recognise these heads, they are of the members of the Prophet's family. May you be cursed, you wretched Shimr! May God's scourge be upon you, you contemptible creature! What have you done?" The old man ripped his shirt and started hitting his face. Within minutes, the news spread through the crowd.

But Shimr immediately suppressed the disturbance. Trumpets began to playing at full volume, the old man was crushed to dust under the horses' hooves, people ran helter-skelter to save their lives, the songs of victory drowned the sounds of wailing and lamentation.

Sahl Ibn Sa'ad, who was one of the well-respected companions of the Prophet, was returning from a visit to the Baitul Muqaddus.* Seeing the pomp and show, he asked people, "Dear brothers, what is this new Eid that I know nothing about?"

A Syrian whispered to him, "Be quiet, this is the celebration of the killing of Husain. Today, Husain's head is being taken to Yazid's court.

"The women of the Prophet's family have been taken as captives and brought here."

Sahl Ibn Sa'ad could not believe his ears and he staggered.

"O God, what is this I see? The murder of the Prophet of God's grandson and these celebrations?"

"If you want to save your life, don't say another word," the Syrian whispered in his ear and slipped away.

As the procession came closer, Sahl Ibn Sa'ad saw the heads on the lances and the women of the Prophet's family, bareheaded, seated on the bare backs of the camels, and he began to scream, "O, Allah, take away my sight, don't punish me in my old age with such torture." Then he addressed the people of Syria, "O, Muslims, who is responsible for this heinous crime? Whose garment bears the stains of innocent blood? Look, O, Muslims! Look carefully, has the blood been washed off your hands? How long will you watch this spectacle silently? Will you depend on your ignorance on the Day of Resurrection to absolve yourself from blame?"

Shimr panicked when he heard this. He signaled his special force. "Raise the clamour of the drums and bugles and trample these rebels under your horses' hooves."

* Jerusalem

A catastrophe had been averted for the time being as the crowds were scattered. The spectators hid in their homes. But that night, hundreds of homes resounded with the sounds of mourning for Husain. At Yazid's palace there was illumination, festivities and revelry. But a disconsolate darkness filled the hearts of many, as moans and wails were heard from several homes, and people prostrated in prayer, trembling in fear of God's wrath. Those who had seen the heads mounted on the lances and observed the deplorable condition of the tormented captives were distraught and in shock. But there had been many in the crowd who were ignorant and who had enjoyed the spectacle. They had danced joyfully and thrown rubbish at the captives while tossing flowers at the triumphant army. Shimr had smiled and nodded his acceptance of their felicitations.

The court was a picture of magnificence. Beautiful dancers were gyrating sinuously to the alluring rhythm of the harp and the viol, the air was redolent with fragrances, and surrounded by beautiful young women, Yazid sat on a gemstone-studded throne, playing chess.

When the captives were presented at court he deliberately ignored them so that people would see that he regarded them as mere captives, despite the fact that they were the Prophet's family. He held a goblet of wine in one hand, and in the other, a stick with which he sometimes poked a maiden, sending her into throes of laughter, or he moved a chess-piece.

When Husain's head was set on a gilded tray and brought to him, without even so much as glancing at it, he casually

said, "Put it under the throne." Then he became absorbed in his chess moves.

The weak and suffering captives stood before him, trembling with shame and humiliation. The horrors they had endured in Karbala, and later, during the long journey, were evident from their bruised bodies, inflamed feet, and eyes filled with sorrow and anguish. They could barely stand. The women of the Prophet's family, whose chadars not even the angels had ever caught a glimpse of, now stood in this court filled with people, their faces hidden in their hair, the object of lewd glances. Standing by her aunt's side, with her face hidden, little Sakina tightly held the tattered rags of her shirt around herself, shivering violently. The Persian princess, Imam Husain's beloved Bano, drowning in the sorrow of the death of her brave young son and her baby, Asghar, whose last cries still resounded in her ears, was lost in some strange oblivion. Her eyes were empty and lightless. Leaning on her mother's arm, Fatima Kubra, the bride of one night, the girl whose hands were still bright with bridal henna, was crushed under the burden of her widowhood, her dry, vacant eyes pinned to the ground. Zainul Abidin's body was burning with fever, his wounds from the shackles on his ankles were blistering, and his temples throbbed with the intensity of the restraint he had to exercise.

Oblivious to all this, Yazid was engrossed in his game. He was downing one wine glass after another, emptying the dregs in the tray on which the Imam's head was placed. This was a premeditated *drama*. He was intoxicated with feelings of his own superiority and dominance.

After a long time, Zainul Abidin picked up his heavy chains with both hands, moved a few steps forward, and

said to Yazid, "O Ibn Mu'awiya, we have been standing here quietly for a long time and you have ignored us."

"What a clever move this is," Yazid said carelessly.

"You have made many moves. Do you have any idea of the moves made by the world around you?"

"Why do you bother me, I have no time for this nonsense."

"I am at that point in my life where I no longer have the time or occasion for stupid or clever nonsense. Yazid, time will not always be on your side."

"Are you threatening me? After all, whose son are you! What can one expect from a traitor's son? Your father instigated a fight with me for no reason, he rejected my just rights, instigated my people, and God has punished him."

"You are holding God responsible for the bestiality of your army. Look into your soul, you are my father's murderer, and Satan is your companion. My father did not start a rebellion, he did not create trouble. He only refused to endorse your tyranny and plundering. He was not willing to strengthen your position as a murderer and as someone who appoints his family members in high positions and engages in violence. What he did was the duty of every Muslim."

Yazid became livid.

"You all have still not learnt your lesson. You dare to insult the Caliph appointed by God."

"It is not God but your father and your sycophantic governors who have helped you become king. If you had God's blessing then why would you need my father's allegiance? You knew that the Arab nation trusts Husain Ibn Ali and if he did not give you his approval when you were crowned then people would realise that there is something wrong with you."

"Silence!"

Finding himself unable to respond, Yazid became incensed and ordered that this insolent boy be killed immediately. The executioner stepped forward, but Zainab moved quickly and stood before Zainul Abidin.

“O tyrant, this boy is our last hope. If you are going to kill him then give orders to kill us all. Without him we will be left alone, without recourse.”

The executioner halted. Yazid looked around him and saw that his own friends and companions had averted their eyes. Taking advantage of the situation he quickly changed his stance.

“You are still a child.”

“Every child in Husain’s family is accustomed to walking in his footsteps,” Ibn Husain said courageously.

But Yazid ignored the remark. Having realised that he had demeaned himself in the eyes of those present Yazid looked at Imam Husain Ibn Ali’s severed head and then, hitting the Imam’s lips with his staff he said, “With these lips you had refuted my greatness. Why is your tongue not moving now?”

Abu Barza al-Aslami, an elderly man, abstinent and pious, had been the Prophet’s companion. All this time, he had been standing quietly, afraid to speak. But he could no longer restrain himself. He thundered, “O Yazid, take that staff away from those lips! I have seen with my own eyes the Prophet kiss those lips.” Enraged, Yazid stood up and ordered that Abu Barza be thrown out of court. He was so old that killing him would not earn Yazid any praise or approval. Reviling and denouncing Yazid, Abu Barza left.

In order to make a show of his power, Yazid had invited the Roman ambassador to court so that it would be established in a foreign land as well that Yazid was so great and powerful

that even the family of the Prophet prostrated themselves before him.

The ambassador asked Yazid, "What's going on? Whose head is this?"

"It's the head of a traitor, Husain Ibn Ali, who refused to accept my superiority."

"He was the grandson of your Prophet?"

"Yes, but he wanted to deprive me of my rights."

"That is a matter of politics. But you are a Muslim and you don't even have an ounce of mercy in your heart for the family of your Prophet? I belong to the family of Prophet Daud. Generations have passed, but Jews and Christians still press the dirt from my feet to their eyes as a special benediction. Here you are treating your Prophet's children worse than one would treat a non-believer. There is an island in China where a hoof of Hazrat Issa's donkey has been kept as a relic. People go there from far and wide to pay their respects. Your religion is strange, your Prophet has been gone for less than fifty years and you are already treating his family as though they are animals. What kind of religion and faith do you aspire to? And you want to propagate this religion among us?"

At this point, Yazid could not control his fury and he ordered this honest and outspoken man to be executed immediately. Yazid was no longer in his senses. Alcohol and his evil deeds had turned him into a vicious, savage man. He did not think before taking action, nor did he consider asking anyone for advice. He regarded himself as the epitome of wisdom. He acted impulsively. The success he had attained through his abuse of power had led him to believe that this was the best way to get results. His companions, friends and advisors were also belligerent, imprudent men. Nearly

all the philosophers and wise men had either been killed or they had migrated elsewhere, and if there were any left, they kept themselves out of politics and out of Yazid's way.

But the more Yazid's power grew, the more he fell in the eyes of his people. Not only did news of his recalcitrant and reckless behaviour spread throughout Arabia, he became notorious for his obstinacy and wild ways in the foreign lands as well.

The captives, weary and exhausted, holding on to each with great difficulty, were ready to collapse. One of Yazid's minions, seeing that the Caliph was feeling a little deflated, decided to infuse some life into the drama being played out and declared that he would offer the highest price for the little girl among the captives.

Yazid livened up. He laughed and said, "This is a cash only deal."

The scoundrel took out bags of gold coins from inside his waistband and piled them at Yazid's feet.

"I'm offering cash."

Kubra clung fearfully to Bano. Ibn Husain's blood boiled. But Zainab quickly came forward and said to Yazid, "You cannot sell this girl. And if you want to, then you must first declare yourself to be a non-Muslim because a Muslim is forbidden from selling a Muslim girl as a slave."

Yazid was exasperated. Everything he was saying or doing was backfiring. He had no intention of selling Bint Husain. He merely wanted to insult and demean Husain's family. He shouted angrily at the Syrian.

"Get out of my sight, you wretch!" He scolded the man and dismissed the assembly. The captives were thrown into prison. Feeling annoyed and irritated, Yazid walked off to his harem to amuse himself.

Hind

Hind was beautiful beyond compare. She had once been Husain Ibn Ali's slave but he had freed her. Yazid worshipped beauty and had married her. There was no dearth of women in his palace but he adored Hind. He would forget all his earthly and otherworldly cares in her company. Hind was a virtuous and spiritual person. She had no connection whatsoever with any of the political upheavals that were taking place around her. She was vaguely aware of some differences between Imam Husain and Yazid, but she didn't have the slightest idea that Husain had been killed. Nor could she imagine, even in her wildest dreams, that such a horrifying incident could have actually happened. She was extremely attached to the Prophet's family because Bano had treated her like her own daughter.

But one can sense from afar a dear one's misfortune. That day she had been feeling really depressed, a strange kind of dread had gripped her, unfounded fears made her anxious. She felt an acute thirst that seemed to burn her throat but the minute she touched a drink to her lips, she felt nauseated, as if the bowl was not filled with a fragrant drink but was full to the brim with thick, viscous blood.

Yazid tried to draw her into his embrace, but she was cold and lifeless like a clay statue. Yazid became exasperated.

"Today I'm feeling disturbed and anxious," he said angrily. "Amuse me, I'm consumed by strange emotions.

Even alcohol is not having any effect, it's putrid like a leper's vomit and bland like saliva."

Hind merely lowered her head and said nothing.

Her passivity grew. Despite making forced efforts, she was unable to please Yazid. She tolerated his blows and punches silently. Yazid wanted to strangle her. He had scored such a great victory today and yet he felt as if all his joys were being stifled.

He drifted in and out of restless sleep. He had always suffered from insomnia, but tonight he was waking up repeatedly, drenched in sweat, screaming. He groaned and moaned between spells of slumber and waking either because of excessive drinking earlier or some terrifying vision. Lying still and listless at his side, Hind was going mad listening to the sounds of lamentation carried in the wind. Who was weeping? It seemed as though the entire universe was crying. No one knew how many people in the capital were lamenting and moaning in their sleep that night.

This silent mourning in the quiet of the night seemed to be smothering her. She got up from the bed and tip toed around, trying to determine the source of these sounds. After much effort, she came to the conclusion that the cries were coming from the prison not too far away from the castle. She ordered her maid to ask the guard to find out who was crying, and why. Was someone ill?

The guard came back with the report that among the new captives that had been brought in today was a little girl who repeatedly woke up startled in her sleep and cried loudly.

Hind felt as if steel rods were piercing her ears. One could hear in the little girl's lamentation the cries of the entire world's sorrowful children.

"Is the child sick?"

“We don’t know.”

“Is she hungry?”

“All the captives are hungry.”

Sleep had forsaken her. Hind stood at the window staring at the prison. Then, overcome by a sudden thought, she took her maid and the guard and quietly walked out of the palace towards the prison. Seeing her, the guards opened the prison gates and let her in.

It was dark inside. A few soiled and dirty clothes were stacked in a pile in a corner. The air was malodorous and damp. She couldn’t breathe, the smell made her feel faint, her head swam from the stench of dried blood and festering wounds. She asked for a candle and peered around her. When she saw the child she clutched her breast.

Lying on her side on the rough, grimy stone-floor was a little girl, a withered blossom. Her frail, emaciated body was wracked with sobs. When Hind bent down and looked at her closely, her heart broke. The child’s clothes were in tatters, there were sores and bruises on her earlobes, her dry lips trembled as she cried. It was Sakina.

Nearby, a pile of rags moved, chains clanged.

In the sparkling light of the candle, Bano saw someone who, dressed in dazzling, glittery clothes, looked like a fairy. Gripped by fear, she hastily shook Zainab who immediately recognised Hind and quickly turned and hid her face in her knees in shame. Hind kept staring at her, then kneeled before her.

“Bint Ali, is it a dream or reality! God, someone please wake me up or my heart will explode.”

“Has the time come for those in a deep slumber to wake up? What we have suffered, what we are suffering—do the citizens of Arabia know nothing?”

Hind fell down and throwing her head at Zainab's feet she started wailing.

"I'm imprisoned in the palace like a bird whose wings have been clipped."

"Your feet are bound by the chains of luxury and opulence," Zainab said sarcastically. "Some people have sunk themselves into a life of luxury and indulgence and forgotten everything; some have lost their senses after being trapped in poverty and hardship; some are silent because they have made the bounty, handed out to them by the king, their life support; some have lost their voice after suffering the tyranny and brutality of the ruler. In short, no one has either the time or the opportunity to think about the Prophet's family. Why have you come here, Hind? This will not bode well for you."

"A curse upon the life that has been bought by selling one's soul. Yes, Daughter of my Master, the shadow of evil has fallen over the Arab nation." Lowering her head, Hind wept inconsolably.

"Oh God, what is to become of us?"

Hind's cries woke up everyone else. When she heard the account of Husain's murder from Zainab, she wept like a mad woman and banged her head against the prison walls. Then she left and came back immediately with food, jugs filled with water and sweet nectars, and magnificent garments, carried on trays by maidservants. She begged everyone to have food, but no one could swallow even a single morsel. For her sake, they took small gulps of water, but refused to touch the garments.

"Our clothes are the only evidence of the brutality that we have been subjected to. The bodies of our dear ones lie on the plain of Karbala without shrouds, how can we put on these resplendent garments?"

Overwhelmed by a feeling of failure, Hind returned to the palace weeping and lamenting. She roused Yazid and expressed her anger and disappointment to him. She reprimanded him, tried to instill the fear of God in his heart, but he wouldn't budge.

"Don't interfere in the affairs of the state, you wretched woman, or you will regret your actions."

"When you have already trampled over my faith and beliefs, what greater punishments can you give me now? O Yazid, from today I forbid you to touch me. I can smell Husain's blood on your hands."

Yazid became very worried. He had not expected the situation to be reversed in this manner. He had thought that the thorn in his side was removed forever. He didn't know that he would be bound from head to toe in barbed chains. Strange news kept pouring in from all the cities, there were disturbances everywhere. People gathered on the main streets, recounting and listening to the details of Husain's murder, and then they wept and lamented. A storm of hatred against Yazid and his governors was rapidly building up and there were continuous efforts being made to suppress all kinds of uprisings. But the more dams Yazid and his followers built, the greater was the force of the flood.

Crying and wailing to mourn Husain's death was declared a crime. Mourning for Husain was criticism of the regime's policy, and those who criticised the government were the enemies of Islam. But policing people's tears turned out to be an impossible feat. They became more incensed and just to irk Yazid began to grieve at every street corner. Poets composed hundreds of elegies and dirges, which drove people to beat their chests wildly, throw dust in their hair.

The Arab people are very emotional, their actions are always intense and passionate.

Those who disobeyed the orders against mourning for the Imam were severely punished. They were trampled under the horses' hooves, whipped until their skin was flayed, and then hanged. The victorious army descended like unruly beasts upon the citizens and scenes from the battlefield of Karbala were re-enacted.

But every drop of Husain's blood was starting to turn into a raging storm. People's hearts were filling with poison. The more they were hindered, the more they resisted. Unaware of the innocent Imam's murder, of the slaughter of their Prophet's innocent children, they had been sitting comfortably in their homes and now their conscience was berating them. Regarding this expression of sorrow as a way to atone for their sins, they became even more passionate in their displays of grief.

The people didn't possess any weapons, they only had sensitive hearts. They turned Husain into their guiding light and responded to tyranny with anguish, to swords with tears, and every drop of their tears accumulated to become an extraordinary, sweeping storm. Yazid's life became hell. His nights and days turned into a torment.

The Return

In the battlefield of Karbala, the bodies of the martyrs lay in the open, without shrouds or graves. According to royal decree, they were not to be buried under any circumstances. Anyone found disobeying this order would be considered a traitor and would receive the harshest punishment. His home and his belongings would be burned down, his wife and children would be crushed in an oil-mill.

It so happened that a few members of the tribe of Banu Assad, from whom Imam Husain Ibn Ali had bought land in Karbala, were passing that way and they saw the bare bodies of the martyrs. There were women accompanying them as well, who became distraught at the gory sight and started weeping and wailing.

“Who are these ill-fated people whose bodies lie here? Who is the tyrant who has severed their heads? Why haven’t they been buried?”

The men hung their heads in shame and said hesitantly, “These are the bodies of Imam Husain and his friends and relatives. They were slaughtered for the offense of treachery and the ruler has declared their burial a crime.”

“Who is the villain who has declared the burial of the children of the Prophet of God crime?” the women asked angrily.

“Who can stand up to the royal decree? Our safety lies in slipping away from here quietly and quickly.”

"A curse upon such safety! May God's infinite wrath fall upon the ruler who treats the dead body of a Muslim with such disrespect. It is incumbent upon us to bury these bodies. If you men are afraid then sit at home with bangles on your wrists, we women will wrap them in shrouds made from our chadars, and bury them." Saying this, the women picked up shovels and started digging.

The men felt deeply humiliated. They snatched the shovels from the hands of their women.

"O good women, sit down, let us do this. We will suffer the consequences, but we will bury them."

So, they wrapped the bodies as best as they could and after offering the funeral prayers, buried them. They also put up signs with names for the ones they recognised.

Everyone who heard about this courageous act by the Banu Assad lauded them.

But the captives in the prison of Damascus were completely unaware of this heroic feat. The prison was as constricted and dark as Yazid's heart. No air passed through nor were the faces of the occupants discernable in the darkness—one could not tell whether it was night or day, and bats and black swallows noisily flapped their wings as they flew around, frightening the children into cowering in their mothers' laps. This wasn't a prison, it was a grave. Whoever entered it was released only when dead. The blackness of the walls was stifling, the children could not breathe, if they noticed a small hole or an opening, they rushed towards it to catch a glimpse of the sky. The building was so decrepit that everyone was afraid the ceiling might collapse at any moment.

But at least they had a shelter over their heads. The bodies of their relatives and loved ones were lying on the

bleak plains of Karbala, on the burning sand, without any cover, without shrouds.

"Allah, if I can get rid of these ropes I will ask for directions and somehow get to Karbala," Zainab said, sighing sorrowfully.

"Phupi Jaan, please take me with you," said Sakina, "I miss Baba very much. If you don't take me with you I'll weep and weep until I'm dead."

"How can you come my daughter, it's a very very long journey."

"I will go. Why doesn't Baba come? Amma said he's gone to get water from the river, but it's been so many days and he hasn't returned. I'll die waiting for him, but he won't come. Phupi Jaan, why has Baba forgotten me?"

Bano suddenly woke up with a start.

"Someone please light a candle. If my Ali Asghar wakes up in this darkness he will be terrified." Then she remembered and clutched her bosom helplessly. "Oh God, I have lost my mind, I keep forgetting that Ali Asghar has abandoned his mother's lap and is sleeping on his father's chest."

While Sakina was reminiscing about her father she suddenly felt he was not there because the door was locked. Sobbing, she begged the guard to open the door.

"Please, O guard, for God's sake, leave the door open, my father is about to come, he might leave if he sees it closed."

"Who are you, girl?" the guard asked sternly.

"I'm Sakina, I'm waiting for my father, Husain Ibn Ali, he's coming to get me."

"Be quiet girl, your nonsense is driving me crazy. You cry all night and day, I can't get any sleep because of your incessant weeping, get away from here. The padlock will not be opened before tomorrow morning."

"But I will be dead by then."

"That will be for the best, we will be rid of your constant moaning and groaning. What a stubborn girl! Shimr's slaps haven't driven any sense into your head, hunh? Listen to me, close the door or else we will send for him again and he will tie a rope around your neck."

The harsh rebuke scared the girl. Cowering against the wall, she stumbled around looking for an opening to help her breathe.

"My daughter, why are you bumping into the walls in the dark, come and sit in my lap, my dearest."

But the girl had only one refrain: "Baba is so heartless. Why doesn't he come and free us from this prison. He doesn't care about us at all."

Bano felt her way in the dark and picked her up. Mother and daughter clung to each other and wept inconsolably. The little girl's sleep had abandoned her, she couldn't even close her eyes. One by one, everyone took her in their lap and tried to put her to sleep. Kubra said to her younger sister, "Come to me, my dearest, sleep for a few moments."

"No, I can't," Sakina said, "I will only sleep when Baba comes, when he puts me to sleep."

The guard heard the girl's lamentation and had a wicked thought. In prisons run by tyrants those who work there also become insensitive and callous. In the prison courtyard, still mounted on lances, were the heads of those who had been killed. He took down Imam Husain's head, placed it on a platter, covered it up and brought it to their cell.

"Here, the emperor has sent you fruits," he said and slid the platter across the threshold. Closing the door, he burst into laughter.

Who knows what fragrance the girl inhaled, she jumped out of her sister's lap.

"Babà is here, my dearest Baba is here." She rushed, stumbling in the dark, and fell over the tray. Alarmed, everyone started screaming.

"Let us have some light here, for God's sake."

The guard came in laughing and extended the torch towards them. Sakina removed the cover slowly, with trembling, feverish hands. A muffled scream escaped from her heart. The girl put her face on her father's and drew her last breath.

The guard became frightened. Quickly, but with great difficulty, he wrested the head from Sakina's lifeless hands and dashed off from there.

The lamentations and heart-rending screams that came from the prison shook the very foundations of Yazid's palace.

In her sleep that night Hind felt as if something had struck her heart and she woke up screaming. She had been held in captivity since she had expressed sympathy for the captives. She had stopped eating, she no longer cared about what she wore or how she looked. Yazid was madly in love with her and was distressed to see her in this condition. He got angry with her, showed his frustration, but Hind had turned away from the world and was slowly fading away, waiting for death.

The conditions in the country were deteriorating. Even mentioning the Imam's name was now a crime. But people had become obstinate and despite all the restrictions and the violence they were subjected to, there was talk of Husain everywhere. The fire of rebellion spread to every corner.

With great difficulty Zainul Abidin had secured permission to arrange for his sister's funeral. Yazid was now afraid of

the resentment being shown by the citizens, so he relented. When Ibn Husain carried his little sister's shrouded body in his arms towards the cemetery, people joined him in large numbers. Efforts were made to stop them, which resulted in riots. The army was called in to disperse the crowds. Violence was unleashed upon the people. There was a clash between those accompanying the procession of Sakina's body and Yazid's army. The situation worsened until it became unmanageable.

Ibn Husain returned with the body and buried it in the prison courtyard, adjacent to the prison gates.

After this incident, the administration came to the conclusion that the issue of the captives had turned into a real predicament. Keeping them in the capital, they felt, was akin to giving an invitation to their own destruction. If the captives stayed on, there would be some problem every other day. It was best that they be allowed to return to their homes. The disturbances would automatically die down after they had left, gradually people would forget everything.

Who is the Culprit?

The victors in the armed forces were richly rewarded, but in the hearts of the people there grew an immense hatred for them, which increased steadily. Wherever they went they were greeted with profanities, and people would turn their faces away from them in disgust. Frequently, garbage was hurled at them. It became difficult for them to leave their homes. After observing the attitude of the public towards them, their friends and companions also deserted them, while their relatives were repelled by their very presence.

In the mosques, after every namaaz there was a mention of Husain. Yazid's enemies, who had been in hiding all this time, became emboldened—they openly began issuing *fatwas** against him.

Yazid had to make all manner of excuses to justify his position. He demanded testimonies of his innocence from his courtiers, and his special lackeys even went so far as to absolve him from any wrongdoing.

“It's all Ibn Ziyad's fault.”

“The real culprit is Ibn Sa'ad.”

“But Husain's murderer is Shimr Ziljaushan, he should be punished accordingly.”

Yazid thought that he would get rid of these sacrificial goats in this way. They had become bold because of what

* Judicial decree issued by Muslim clerics.

they had accomplished. Yazid now feared the growing power of all the men who had been involved in Husain's murder.

Museeth Ibn Rab'ai was also part of the discussion on the 'real' culprits. He was repeatedly glaring at Yazid. Finally, an Yazid exasperated said, "O Ibn Raba'i, why don't you say something?"

"A curse upon the killers of Husain!" he said, lowering his gaze.

Yazid was not at all happy with this response. He said to Ibn Numair, "What's your opinion?"

"Do you want a truthful answer or a conciliatory one?" Ibn Numair asked cleverly.

"Give me an answer that is truthful."

"My life won't be in danger, will it? The truth is always bitter."

"You are promised immunity," Yazid said. What else could he say? Also, he did not wish to ignore his opponents anymore. Either he could win them over to his side or get rid of them permanently, he thought.

"Husain's real killer is the one who sent the armies against him, issued orders for his slaughter and appointed executioners to carry out these orders! O Amir, whatever happened was a result of your command, for no one else would have had the courage to even look askance at the grandson of the Prophet."

"Husain was a traitor. It is treason against Islam to betray the reigning Caliph, it is treason against the will of Allah."

"Then Amir Mu'awiya was the greatest traitor of them all because he refused to swear allegiance to Ali Ibn Abi Talib and fought against him."

Yazid was visibly livid. But Ibn Numair had said so much that there was no point in holding back now and so he continued, "You have promised me immunity. But

breaking an oath is not something new for you. You regard yourself as the only custodian of Islam. However, opposing you and your governors does not constitute antagonism towards Islam. You are all individuals, you are not the foundation of Islam. Islam gives the freedom of harbouring personal opinions. Look within yourself. Are you really a true Muslim?"

"Have you lost your mind, old man? Cease this absurd talk at once."

If times were different, Yazid would have had him beheaded immediately. But the present circumstances had thrust him into a torturer's rack. Seeing him helpless and frustrated, his special advisors, friends and trusted confidantes, were brazenly questioning him. Yazid desperately needed their support while they were acting arrogantly because they knew they were indispensable. Yazid was realising now that when Imam Husain was alive he wasn't as dangerous as he was now, a martyr who would live forever, a martyr who had lost one life and gained a thousand more.

The courtiers advised that it would be best to arrange for the members of the Prophet's family to return comfortably and honourably to their home. But before sending them back, Yazid requested that they appear in his court again.

The condition of the captives was so pitiful that even the prison walls seemed to be lamenting in sorrow at their fate. Tears constantly rolled down the dust covered faces of the Prophet's family as they ceaselessly grieved. Starvation had weakened their bodies and they could barely stand, their hearts beat violently, as if ready to burst out of their chests. The old wounds would not heal. An unhealthy diet and the lack of fresh air made them look like long-suffering, frail patients.

The moment the guard opened the gates of their prison cell the children clung to their mothers in terror.

“Amma, someone is coming, hide us.”

The mothers clamped their hands fearfully on the children’s mouths so that the guards would not get upset.

Shimr Ziljaushan entered their cell. He had leprosy now, which was spreading rapidly in a gruesome manner all over his body. He looked terrifying.

“My kind master has forgiven you. You will not be killed. Be happy that the time of your release has come.”

No one had the strength to feel happy. Everyone remained seated, their heads lowered.

“You have been asked to appear at court. Get up!”

“We have been insulted and demeaned once already in your emperor’s court. Why does he ask us to come again? Does he wish to torment us further? For God’s sake, leave us here to die slowly in this prison. What good will it do to be free now? What is left for us in this world? Husain has been killed, our near and dear ones have been separated from us. We will yearn to see a glimpse of their faces until the Day of Resurrection. Tell your generous emperor to send his executioners and behead us, so that this story can finally end. These illusions are a heavy burden for us.”

Ibn Husain dragged himself on the rough stone floor and struggled to stand up. He was still burning with fever. His aunt said, “Our silence is our speech. What is the use of engaging with these scoundrels? If the emperor has sent for us then it is prudent to go.” Then Zainab whispered to Ibn Husain, “If we rot away in prison, people will forget us. This will be a great injustice. If we go out then at least people will see how we are being treated, they will think about us. You are our Imam, may God keep us under the protection

of our Imam until the end of the world. You are the centre of our hopes, our support. Ill-fated and unfortunate that we are, we will do what you ask."

Everyone got up slowly, labouriously drawing themselves to their feet. It was a torture to even move a hand, every joint in the body ached, the bones rattled.

When the captives were brought to court, Yazid had all but forgotten his chess moves. Silence prevailed, only the sound of the chains and shackles echoed.

Yazid was cowering. He rose to his feet hastily and gently helped everyone to sit down. After having laid all the blame on Shimr Ziljaushan and Omar Ibn Sa'ad, he completely absolved himself of all culpability.

He wept, "I am so remorseful. All this was done by these miscreants. They will receive such punishments that will be remembered even by their future generations. Truth is, they had been nursing feelings of malice toward Husain Ibn Ali for a long time."

Then he ordered that the chains and shackles of the captives be removed and pretended to make an exhibition of his anger and wrath toward the miscreants.

"They will be punished severely, each one of them will be beheaded."

"Who will be beheaded? Who will be severely punished? Are you trying to fool us, treat us as though we are children?" said Ibn Husain.

"It was not my intention that Ibn Ali be martyred. If I had been in Karbala, I would have persuaded him and brought him around to the right path. Whatever happened, transpired without my knowledge."

"Yazid, you cannot deceive me with this talk. You can trick the world, but the truth will not be hidden. Husain's

blood will talk. Your words, dipped in poison, are very painful. If you send for the executioners this instant and have us beheaded, we will be grateful."

"You may not trust me, but I do not make false promises. The door to the treasury is open, I am willing to pay blood compensation for your relatives."

It was a custom among the Arabs that instead of a life for a life, the relatives of those killed could accept money as recompense from the killers. Zainab's face turned red with rage.

She said, "Give the compensation for Husain's blood to Rasulullah on the Day of Resurrection, or to Husain's mother, Fatima Zehra and his father, Ali Ibn Abi Talib, for they are the ones who have a right over it. O, Yazid Ibn Mu'awiya, now our account will be settled in God's court. How many will you pay compensation for? You have not just slaughtered the Prophet's family, you have slaughtered all of humanity. On the Day of Reckoning, give compensation to God."

Yazid's body shook uncontrollably, colour drained from his face. The courtiers were filled with horror.

"You are free, you have my permission to go wherever you wish," Yazid said lifelessly.

"If indeed there is any mercy in your heart then do us a favour and return the things that were pilfered from us. Give us the heads and garments of our martyred, also our chadars, so that we can use them as shrouds, and then, finally, give us permission to return home."

Yazid immediately had everything brought over to them.

The sight of the tattered garments, chadars, and torn turbans, all soaked in blood, struck terror into the hearts of the courtiers, as though suddenly the martyred, whose

bare bodies lay trampled in Karbala, had come to life and were standing before them. Yazid covered his eyes fearfully, an inexplicable dread shook his frame. People felt they were losing their senses as they stared wide-eyed at the bloody clothing.

“This is my beloved brother, Husain’s turban drenched in blood, this is my mother’s milk that turned into blood, the arrows entwined into the folds of the turban are like a porcupine’s spines, not even a single strand is visible.”

Yazid was flabbergasted, he lost his mind and his arrogance and vanity surfaced once again. To compensate for his feelings of inadequacy, he said impulsively, “Ibn Husain, is this your father’s turban or the rags of a beggar?”

Hearing him speak so callously at a tragic and solemn moment as this, Ibn Husain burst out laughing.

“Yazid, you are a very petty man. My father did not require satin and golden silks to create an illusion of grandeur. Even today his bare corpse is swathed in the light of courage and righteousness, while you are naked though you are wearing these brocades and satins.”

At any other time, such a display of insolence in Yazid’s court would have resulted in instant death. But the burning hatred in the eyes of his courtiers had paralysed his regal power. His courtiers were repulsed by him, as if he were not a living human being but a rotting corpse whose odour was gnawing away at the human brain. Thinking that it was best to be prudent, Yazid controlled himself and said meekly.

“Everyone will be punished. This un-Islamic act will not be forgiven.”

Those who were expecting rewards and favours suddenly became alert. They had never fully trusted Yazid anyway.

Bano pulled out Ali Akbar's garments from the pile of clothing. With what hopes and dreams his aunt, Zainab had made these for him.

"These were new, why are they in shreds like his mother's heart? Ali Akbar, when you were departing you did not say you will not return, you did not say I will never see the Prophet's living image ever again."

When Umme Rubab picked out her chadar, Ali Asghar's tiny, blood-stained kurta got entangled with it and emerged from the pile. She quickly grabbed it, pressed it to her eyes, and kissed it fervently.

"Look at the state of my beloved child's new kurta. When the three-headed arrow pierced my beloved's neck, he threw up warm red blood instead of milk. Ya Allah, my milk turned into blood! My son, my beautiful baby! Your mother wakes up in the middle of the night and looks for you. I stare at my vacant lap and imagine the worst...you lying in that desolation. My beautiful child, you used to get startled in your sleep even by the flutter of a pigeon's wings. How scared you must be now in that desolate place, my dearest!"

Zainab came forward and held her close to her breast.

"Do not cry my princess. O ill-fated mother, your precious son is resting in his father's lap. I had a dream. The Prophet of God is looking for his son in the battlefield of Karbala. In my mother's lap is her slaughtered son's trampled and crushed body. Fatima Zehra is weeping tears of blood. I have also seen my father in my dream. Instead of his sword, the Zulfiqar, the Lion of God carries fragments of his own heart in his hands."

"Amma, these are Sakina's earrings. Why have the white pearls turned red?"

The pearls were quivering like drops of blood on Kubra's palm. Suddenly, as if bitten by a snake, she saw Qasim's turban, picked it up with shaking hands and pressed it to her eyes. She felt like lightening had passed through her eyes. The years they spent together as children, his face lit with laughter, his smiling lips, that short period of their marriage, that fragrant body... Qasim Ibn Hasan! O fickle beloved, the body trampled and crushed under horses' hooves... Kubra fell down in a swoon.

The brother picked up his sister in his arms, his frail and weak body suddenly revived. In the meantime, the courtiers were going through a strange time, their eyes were lowered, their lips were sealed, they wept silently.

Yazid felt as if he was collapsing under the weight of a nameless burden. He looked around him in distress and observed the cold and hostile eyes of those who had once flattered him.

“I will give you anything you ask for.”

“Anything we ask for?” Zainab Bint Ali asked.

“Yes, I promise.”

“Then allow me to weep. Ibn Mu’awiya, unless your heart is made of stone, let me weep to my heart’s content. Ever since the martyrdom of my brothers, I have not had the opportunity to lament. Not a single tear has fallen from my eyes. The tears that have been held back are making my head explode. I want these tears to flow. Provide us with a house where we can freely mourn before we return.”

Yazid immediately issued orders that they be given a separate house.

This was the first majlis to mourn for Husain. People gathered there from near and far. Zainab recounted every episode from the beginning. She unburdened her heart.

Aun and Muhammad's martyrdom; the slaughter of Qasim; the insult meted out to young Ali Akbar's youthful body; the three-headed arrow stuck in the neck of the innocent, six-month-old Ali Asghar; Abbas's severed arms, his blood-spattered banner and his blood-soaked water-skin; then Husain's isolation and helplessness; Shimr astride his chest to sever his head; the demeaning treatment of the heads that were mounted on lances; the chadars snatched away from the women's heads; Sakina's bleeding ears; the shackles around Ibn Ali's feet; Ali Asghar's empty cradle; the burning tents—she recounted every detail with such pathos that those who were listening went mad with anger and grief.

Yazid was extremely agitated and insisted Husain's family leave as soon as possible. He arranged for five-hundred riders to accompany them, men who had deep sympathy for the Prophet's family. He ordered Nu'man Ibn Basheer to prepare for the journey to Medina safely and ordered that he provide them with whatever they wanted.

But before going to Medina the Prophet's family went to Karbala. The heads of their martyrs clasped to their breasts, they travelled to the place where their world had come to an end. Along the way, people stopped to hear Zainab and Kulsoom recount the events of Karbala. Their stirring narration and then the mourning for Husain—there were many gatherings held as they proceeded, each one filled with the intensity of a wild blaze.

When they arrived at Karbala they discovered that the bodies of the martyrs had already been buried by the members of the tribe of Banu Assad. Each person had been buried at the spot where he had been martyred. They then proceeded to bury the heads with their respective bodies.

Fatima Kubra fell in a swoon over Qasim Ibn Hasan's grave.

"Now I will spend the rest of my life at his grave," she wailed. "My world is filled with darkness. I will not leave my life-partner alone in this desolate place."

People tried to reason with her, soothe her. She fainted repeatedly because she was so frail and weak. Finally, she was made to lie down in the palanquin.

Zainab Bint Ali was not herself, too. Again and again, she would bid farewell to Husain's grave, climb onto the palanquin and then, her heart sinking, she would get down and fall over the grave again.

"The person who was my world is slumbering here, I wish I could build a small cottage nearby and live out my days here."

"You forget, you are the leader of whatever remains of this caravan," people said. "Everything will fall apart. We are alive because of your support, you have to make sure that everyone reaches Medina safely."

"What will I say to everyone in Medina? What will I tell Sughra? She will ask, 'where did you leave my dear ones?' How will I look the people of Medina in the eye? So many flowers have wilted and died, why am I still alive?"

"Because you have to live. You are the only one who can give people answers to their questions. Have you forgotten Baba's command? What did our Imam say? Is his sacrifice to be in vain? The sand has absorbed his blood and is silent? No, Phupi Jaan, there is only one purpose in our life now. We have to tell the world how a strong power besieged a small group of people and destroyed them. But we will also show them that we have not been annihilated. As long as the ideals of truth and justice are alive, we too shall live. We will prove to the world that the truth is luminous and flourishing."

Whenever the powerful try to destroy the weak and helpless, we will be alive again. When the blood of innocent people is shed, the blood of Husain will become more vivid. People will chant Husain's name when they take a stand against tyranny. Victory is free from the bounds of life and death, only the virtuous idea achieves victory."

Zainab kissed the grave for the last time and with the desire to meet her brother soon alive in her heart, she climbed into the palanquin.

The journey to Medina commenced. People in every town and city along the way gathered around the caravan and whatever they heard they repeated to their fellow citizens, friends and relatives. In this way, the ordeal that the Prophet's family had suffered in Karbala became a story that was retold in every household. People assembled, listened to the account, and mourned.

Thousands of poets and writers were profoundly affected by these accounts and their pens were set in motion. Every episode, event, happening related through the elegies and requiems touched the hearts of the people. There were gatherings of mourners in nearly every home. People came together, heard the retelling and were deeply moved. Respect and reverence for Husain grew manifold. Hatred for his enemies intensified greatly as well. The citizens finally made life miserable for his murderers, it was difficult for them to move around in society. This fire was impossible to extinguish even by the strongest power. When sentiments come to life and grow as a public force, no power in the world can suppress them.

The government had to combat a very strong power—people's rage and fury. When helpless and unprotected individuals decide in favour of the truth, it's impossible to

crush them, repress them. In the face of public onslaught great regimes are blown away like chaff.

The people of Medina were unaware of the happenings when the caravan arrived there. The witnesses that accompanied them were the burnt tents, Ali Asghar's empty cradle, the garments drenched in blood.

The caravan halted at the gates of the city and Zainab said, "O, people of Medina, I do not have the strength to walk into the city. From this gate a group of close-knit family members had set out on a journey. Today, this caravan returns after having lost everything to plunderers. We have nothing left except for these charred tents; these tattered, blackened chadars; Ali Asghar's empty cradle; and the sorrowful Zuljanah. The grandson of the Prophet was martyred in the battlefield of Karbala after three days of starvation and thirst, his sons, brothers and nephews were slaughtered before his eyes, the six-month-old Ali Asghar received a three-headed arrow in his neck before he died in his father's arms."

When Fatima Sughra heard this, a heart-rending scream escaped from the depths of her heart and she fell on the sand and fainted.

When Ummul Buneen heard the details of the martyrdom of her four sons she thanked God that they had passed the test, but the mother's heart knew no peace. She said, with deep sorrow, "O people, what have I done to deserve this devastation of my world?

"All the four pillars of my house have been knocked down. I, who was known as the mother of sons, today my lap is empty. For new brides my chadar was a blessed symbol of motherhood. But my lap is empty today. The rewards of a

lifetime are lost today. My blood has been ruthlessly shed on the sands of Karbala. Why am I still alive?"

A storm was unleashed when the ill-fated caravan returned to Medina. It was an uproar that shook the foundations of the ruling government. Mourning for Husain became the sorrow of the world. It became impossible for Husain's killers to exist in this world. Many went mad. Many committed suicide to escape the torture they were experiencing. People were on the lookout for them everywhere so that they could kill them. They were located one by one and murdered, their entire families were wiped out. Thousands escaped to other countries to live in anonymity.

Meetings and assemblies commemorating Husain's tragic end became commonplace. People recited elegies and dirges and beat their chests as they mourned this tragedy. The government had imposed restrictions on those mourning Husain, but this further inflamed the people. There was mourning, lamentation and self-flagellation on street crossings, intersections. Further restrictions were imposed. The grief and anger only increased. The mourning for Husain spread far and wide, to other countries as well.

The Arab nation is very emotional. Lamentation for Husain became an integral part of faith and belief. The expressions of grief became more intense. People whipped their bodies with blades and knives as they grieved for Husain. They were severely punished, some were crucified, but this did not stop thousands of other mourners from taking their place.

On hearing the sounds of people mourning and lamenting, Yazid felt himself drowning in anguish. He was tormented by sleepless nights. None of the strategies he had

enforced to forbid expressions of grief proved effective. Amir Mu'awiya's dreams had been shattered.

The reins of government were finally turned into the hands of the Abbasid caliphate. Yazid's name became synonymous with the Devil. Today, thirteen-hundred years later, the sorrow of Husain resides in the hearts of millions of people. During the month of Muharram, Husain is remembered with great intensity and devotion. Meetings, *majlises*, gatherings, are held everywhere, the events of Karbala are narrated, recounted, remembered. Even though centuries have passed, the world has not forgotten Husain Ibn Ali and his relatives and friends, and many more centuries will pass until the Day of Resurrection, and the world will not be able to forget the great martyr, Husain Ibn Ali.